Crown for Christmas

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Crown for Christmas

by EarthsickWithoutYou

Summary

Will Graham is a struggling artist and hardworking hotel housekeeper, starved for love, inspiration and happiness until the day he literally collides with the handsome and mysterious King Hannibal of Lithuania. Coffee is spilled and sparks fly -- especially when Will is is hired to be au pair to the King's precocious daughter Abigail at Castle Lecter. Could this be the merriest Christmas for two hopeless romantics from different worlds?

Based on the Hallmark movie of the same title!

Notes

See the end of the work for notes

The Loneliest Season

Will sometimes suspected his alarm clock had the ability to apparate into his skull and ring from deep in there. The jarring, loud BEEP never failed to rip him from his sweetest dreams and shock him into a new day.

He forgot about kissing Valentino by a crystal blue Italian stream and remembered. The Ritz. His thankless job as a hotel housekeeper, catering to the rich and often the very careless -- often even the very mean.

The early shift, towels, sheets, and demanding guests all awaited, while his art supplies on the desk by the window collected dust. Day after day, the same dull routine blocking out his access to creativity and inspiration. Day after day, no choice but to be sensible when he was a natural born dreamer. *Yaaay,* Will thought sarcastically.

He dragged himself from the sheets and stretched, muscles still sore from the long work shift the day before and not really at all ready for doing the same thing all over again, eight hours plus overtime and enough pay to take care of the overdue electric bill. Brushing his teeth by the flickering light over the bathroom sink, Will banged the wall, which made the light go on all the way and then considered how he should use the small amount left from his paycheck after paying the bill.

Rubbing green tea and mint shampoo into his hair under a hot but relentless pummel of a shower (always too much water pressure or a limp drizzle, it never failed), Will felt torn between paying the internet bill or buying Christmas gifts for his roommates, Beverly, Jimmy and Brian.

“Do you know what time it is?” Brian called way too loudly as he knocked on the door, signaling Will to a mild panic.

“No, and don’t tell me!” He rinsed off his Old Spice body wash with a spare wistful sigh for the long, relaxing shower he never got to savor. His neck and back were screaming for a nice massage from a kinder showerhead, but he’d take what he could get. Currently, that was nothing but a rush to work.

“Misbuttoned,” Beverly said affectionately, chewing a slice of toast at the kitchen island counter, hunched over her laptop but glancing up to give Will their ritual morning high five.

“Hmm?” Will stuck a piece of toast in his mouth and looked down to see he had made a mess of getting dressed, again. “Thanks for making breakfast,” he added when he had swallowed his toast and configured his drab grey-blue shirt properly. He sighed at the insignia of the Ritz Carlton and his name tag which allowed for easier, more specific complaining from the guests.

“Are you kidding me? As if I’d cook a lavish meal like this without sharing?” Beverly gestured at the big plate of buttered toast she’d made -- which constituted the entire meal, and Will laughed.

He filled his huge to-go coffee tumbler with black coffee, taking a deep inhale of the invigorating, bitter aroma before sealing the lid.

“Should we leave you and the coffee alone?” Jimmy asked in his usual wry way, entering the apartment’s small kitchen and adapting out of habit to the confines of the space.

Each of them had to squeeze by the other to get their breakfast and coffee, but the routine was seamless. The space was more packed than usual because Beverly was moving out soon and had nowhere else to put her growing stacks of boxes.

She had won a research grant for her graduate thesis on some intricate facet of microbiology Will couldn’t seem to grasp although she must have explained it to him a zillion times while he smiled and blinked slowly. Ah, the solidarity of friendship. No need to understand every nuance to show support! Now, Columbia beckoned and Will would be down to two roommates without any way to make up the difference when the rent went up, one less person to split it with.

“Naw, that’s okay. My love for coffee is an open secret.” Will took a careful sip so as not to burn his tongue more than necessary. “Without it, I’d never get through a day.”

“Same.” Beverly’s fingers flew faster over the keys as Brian came in behind her and ruffled her long, shiny dark hair; she waved him off with an exasperated grunt.

“It wouldn’t kill you to show the same romantic attention to a human that you show to that coffee cup,” Brian reminded Will. “Why don’t you try that dating app I showed you?”

“Thanks, oh wise dating guru, but I don’t have time for a relationship. I came here to paint and I don’t even do *that* lately. I mean,” Will scoffed and grabbed a few mandarin oranges from the bowl on the counter, packing them in his brown paper bag and sticking the meager snack for late morning in his faded army green backpack.

“If I actually had a *break?* I’d definitely spend it painting, not scrolling through the next few lame prospects on the ever-disappointing *dating apps.*”

“Right, but who will inspire the painting?” Brian countered, peeling an orange for himself.

“It doesn’t make any sense,” Beverly added, her glasses sliding slightly down her nose as she looked up from her obsessive note-taking and regarded Will with her standard “loving but stern sister” expression.

She might not be Will’s biological sister, but she sure saw through his b.s. enough to qualify for the role. He didn’t mind at all; before moving to the city he’d never had much in the way of family, and now he had three quirky surrogate siblings.

“You’re not pursuing any of your real passions in life, not your art and not the true love I know you’re interested in, if the stack of romance novels on your bedside table is any indication.”

Will flushed pink and shrugged, glad he really did have to get going or risk lateness to work and another unpleasant talking-to from his take-no-prisoners supervisor Kade.

“If I don’t pay my share of the rent and utilities, I’ll be painting on the street corners for tips, and it’s cold out.” Will shrugged on his brown winter coat and pulled his blue beanie hat over his ears. His cheerful smile almost made its way to his disappointed and confused heart.

“But you aren’t paying the utilities,” Jimmy noted, looking a bit worried. He revealed a stack of multicolored bills which Will had hidden somewhat absent-mindedly on the high shelf in the cabinet, behind the chips.

Will gulped, confronted unpleasantly with the fanned-out envelopes and their demanding reminders stamped on the front, “*pay now to avoid service interruption,*” “*final notice,*” and other sweet nothings. It really sucked that the exorbitant rent on a small New York City apartment didn’t include utilities. They were all several payments late, and Will had agreed to be the financial secretary among the roommates, keeping track of the bills and due dates. He’d felt so guilty for not being able to pitch in his fair square that he’d stuck them in a dark corner, childishly attempting to make the responsibility go away.

“Um, I’ve been meaning to get around to those. But I can’t afford my share, and --”

“Don’t worry about it, we’ll cover the difference,” Jimmy offered. “You know we told you that’s fine.”

“It isn’t,” Will insisted stubbornly. “I won’t get into some habit of swindling you all.”

“Why don’t you give yourself a break on the guilt and avoidance, let us handle the bills for now, and go on a few dates? It’d do you good, Graham,” Beverly scanned his wan features. “You look exhausted.”

“Uh, thanks. Anyway, sorry about the bills. I’ll ask Kade if I can take an extra weekend shift to cover my share.”

As he darted out the door, he was sure his roommates were looking at each other in bafflement and saying stuff like “But we said we’d pay them this time,” and “Why doesn’t a hopeless romantic like Will want to date?”

A dreary subway journey gave him sufficient time to conjure answers for himself, at least. He’d long since promised himself not to be financially dependent on anyone. His dad had always taught him the value of being his own man, no matter what, and taking care of his responsibilities, never relying on or expecting others to help. *That marks the dignity of a man,* his otherwise disinterested father noted, and it always stayed with Will, a needle to his moral compass. He wanted to be a good man, and find a good man or woman to hold his hand someday, but...dating options these days depressed him.

He’d worn himself thin overcoming his naturally introverted nature to keep boring chats with strangers going long enough that he got asked for a drink. And the continual barrage of disappointment when it was never the one, rarely even worth a second date to confirm *not the one*! When he could have been painting during his rare free time. No one he met looked or

acted like the dream lover of his longheld hopes. Before he knew what happened, he'd turned into one of those people who say, “My soulmate wouldn’t be on a dating app,” often causing Beverly to fling the nearest soft and harmless object at his curly head.

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King Hannibal of Lithuania wanted to be absolutely anywhere in the world except for New York City in December. He hated the unavoidable meetings that forced his head under the ice water of nostalgia -- he had met his late wife in the city and everywhere seemed to remind him of who and what he’d lost, confirming his present loneliness.

“Sir?” his butler Abel asked, holding out Hannibal’s designer suit jacket for him to put on.

He’d flung it over the bed earlier and forgotten all about it, wrapped up in sadness, hating the very same penthouse suite at the Ritz that once played host to the first time he fell in love. The royal family always stayed here when in the city, and it wasn’t for Hannibal to shuck off his duties or suggest changes to the many traditions that defined their lifestyle. What would his late father, the greatest king in the country’s history, say to that? Life was disappointing enough without Hannibal disappointing the many people who depended on him. This included his mischievous but sweet seven year old daughter, Princess Abigail, his staff, and around 2.8 million citizens.

So, he thought with a tired, ironic half-smile, buttoning his jacket and looking in the mirror, *no pressure.*

“Very handsome, sir,” Abel put in supportively, his chirpy compliment emerging from the silence Hannibal had again lapsed into while apparently contemplating his royal reflection.

In fact, he’d been staring into his own golden-brown eyes without seeing anything but long days of dull meetings and depressing memories that used to be nice, and fantasizing about taking the jet back home, putting off his decisions on official matters, negotiations to keep the allegiance intact between the US and Lithuania, for some other day. But the responsibilities weren’t going anywhere, so neither was Hannibal until the inane meetings were at an end, mercifully releasing him to fly home and have what was left of Christmas with his daughter.

“Oh. It will do, certainly,” he affirmed, comforting himself with a belated appreciation for his appearance, which was as ever smoothly attractive, silvering light brown hair slicked back from an aristocratic face.

The dark blue Graffiato suit had been tailored to his tall, muscular frame and hugged it to perfection; his gold Versace watch gleamed and the smile he gave himself in the mirror, though fake, looked real. He looked like a man who could be relied upon to lead a strong nation. He infused himself with what pride he could summon on the reminder, rolling his broad shoulders back with a more confident nod.

“What do we have first on the agenda today?” he asked as he and Abel walked down the long hallway which led from the penthouse suite to the hotel proper with its regular guest rooms and bustling occupants on their way down to breakfast.

Abel reviewed the list on top of the file folder he held in one hand, his friendly face looking suddenly regretful. “I’m afraid it’s your least favorite, your majesty. It’s the…”

“The conference on international trade intercourse,” Hannibal finished in unison with his butler while they passed by a housekeeper with lovely brunette hair who was being scolded by a supervisor.

"But I can *explain*," the young man pleaded, and although his face was turned in the opposite direction as Hannibal walked by him, something about the honesty and warmth in this American boy's voice, the softness of his chestnut curls, a hint of an intriguing aura, *something* made him take notice. He assumed the feeling was random and fleeting, dismissed it automatically and kept walking.

“Tiresome, long, banal, I know, sir, but there’s no avoiding it,” Abel sighed. “If it helps, I think the lunch will be from Gabriel Kreuther.”

“All the Golden Ostera caviar in the world won’t make up for the amount of sleep-inducing speeches I’m about to endure.”

“I...see your point, sir. Here now, why not take a moment to enjoy the view?” Abel tried again to cheer the king up, sympathetic to the emotional plight which did not need to be spoken to a butler who had been with the family for over fifteen years.

He led Hannibal to a large window by the elevator to the lobby, gesturing to the stunning skyline which by nightfall would be glowing in red and green lights to celebrate a holiday which, aside from his fatherly duties to make it special for Abigail, would be nothing special for *him*.

“Yes, of course, very good, Abel.” Hannibal pretended to admire the view while concocting another daydream, this time of finding love again. It had been two years since Lina passed away, long enough that his top royal advisors had been politely or not so politely suggesting he find a new bride, as it would return a sense of security to the people of his country.

Hannibal was certain it would achieve that goal, but he disliked the idea of arranged marriages; he’d met Lina by chance and would prefer to love again that same way, as the one indulgence of sweet chaos in his overly organized existence. Yet how could his heart ever beat again in that same, wild way when the world had long seemed colorless, empty of thrills?

In his imagination, he tried to picture a new lover who would simply be perfection, possessing sexiness, wit, kindness and a bit of sassiness to top it off and cause him to get riled in the best ways. He *wanted* to feel all those things again, to taste passion and give all of the somewhat excessive love within him to someone who saw him for more than a king or a fortune and title, a life of luxury; someone who just saw Hannibal as he was underneath pomp, circumstance and crown, public perception and unflappable dignity.

To be wanted for his true self by someone down to earth, honest and sensuous, he did yearn for it without believing it truly possible. The feeling this left him with was...listless. But not

quite *hopeless*, not yet. Some part of him still believed there was a special someone out there, simply waiting to be stumbled upon at the destined day and time.

As Hannibal gazed into the sky wondering about this, and if he should let go of the dream, a delicate swirl of crystal snowflakes began to fill the air. The magical-seeming twirl of glittering white seemed to say, *don't give up.*

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Will sighed a few curses under his breath as he pushed the cart full of dirty plates, dishes and mugs down the long hallway of the thirty-third floor. The wheels of the cart squeaked, as if adding another rebuke to the one he had received from Kade after arriving fifteen minutes late for his shift.

He had no one but himself to blame for dreaming too long in the shower and chatting with his roommates instead of charging straight for the subway. Yet his cheeks burned with indignation at his boss, who had warned him that his next mistake would be the last.

“And no, you can’t have the extra shift this weekend,” Kade had added, rolling her eyes at the mere thought. “Those are privileged shifts, reserved for those of my staff who can actually be relied on.”

He’d been on the housekeeping staff here for over a year and she knew very well he busted his ass many hours every single day and night, knew Will did the job better than anyone else on staff. Yet she always seemed to be nitpicking for his slightest errors. To listen to her talk, he was nothing but a lazy loser, and he wasn’t killing himself with all this work to hear that.

Maybe I should just quit, sit around painting and feeling bad for myself until I’m evicted and have to haul ass back to Louisiana. I’m sure the local Walmart will give me back the shelver job from my high school glory days…

He turned the next corner, the coffee cups on the cart with their remaining few drops of liquid swishing and the metal serving trays clanging with the frustrated speed he kept up. Canned Christmas music playing over the speakers above him seemed to add insult to injury. Christmas had never been the version of it he needed, not even as a kid, but his stupid hopes still got themselves up every December.

Painting retreat? Ha. That’s if I even know how to paint anymore. So much for the plan to save up for art school…

Gloomy eyed and pouting, he didn’t pay enough attention as he continued down his path to the elevator. Out of nowhere, he slammed the cart right into a guest, a tall stranger striding in the opposite direction.

One of the cups was about half-full, and when Will knocked the cart into the stranger with an embarrassing, high-pitched cry of alarm, coffee splashed all over the man’s expensive-looking blue suit.

The stranger said something under his breath that sounded sweary, but it wasn't in English; Will couldn't understand it but felt instantly entranced by the sound of the man's voice, husky, soft and manly. His desperately mortified, bright blue eyes quickly scanned the man's features as he blathered out a pathetic apology, and his heart staggered the second their gazes met.

Holy shit, he's gorgeous, and I just ruined his gorgeous suit, and I'll never have a chance to take one off him because I just made a horrible first impression. Not that someone like him would ever ask me out anyway, come on…

Will decided to tune back into the conversation he was engaged in, noticing that he was in the middle of saying "So incredibly sorry, sir, I didn't see you coming at all--" *That's putting it lightly*

"It's not a problem," the man said breezily, taking a silk handkerchief from his pocket square and dabbing at the brown smudges on the shiny fabric of his jacket. A few drops had also splatted onto his immaculate white shirt.

The man's concern deepened, although his expression never became accusatory towards Will. But he liked his clothes, that much was clear. He rapidly unbuttoned the suit jacket and removed it to look more closely at the stains, assessing whether the attire was salvageable.

In the process of stripping off his jacket, the man revealed that the coffee-dampened shirt was sticking to his stomach, slightly round and the only part of him that apparently wasn't hard fucking muscle. Will's eyes felt like they were going to bust right out of their sockets, especially when he got a glimpse of chest hair and he almost fainted.

At least he didn't wear glasses, Will tried to tell himself to stave off the feelings of delirious lust. Glasses on a hot older man were his ultimate weakness.

Meanwhile, the hottie's companion, a middle-aged bearded man with kind eyes, told Will not to worry. "Accidents happen, young man."

"What's not a problem?" a rather obnoxious voice piped up as someone else approached with a low ding from the elevator. "What in the world is going on here?"

All three men looked to their right to see a good-looking guy whose demeanor reeked nonetheless of snobbery and a bad attitude. He was younger than the other two but older than Will, also dressed in a flashy suit. This new arrival wore a neat beard like the hot guy's other companion, but that was about all they had in common, apparently.

The angry man came to a stop in front of the man with the coffee stained shirt, looking him over as if he owned him. Will felt instant dislike and a weird twinge of jealousy.

"Your new suit!" the man scowled at Will. "How dare you sully his--"

"Shh, Frederick, you're giving me a headache," Will's victim put in smoothly, so cool and unbothered, it was damn sexy. "As Abel noted, accidents do happen. Just be more careful in future, Mr…"

“Graham,” Will said, turning red as the handsome stranger scrutinized him, the other two men who seemed to work for him bickering quietly in the background. “Will Graham. Sir, I...I could pay the dry cleaning bill, it’s the least I could do--”

He could not, in fact, pay to have the pocket square cleaned and he also had no idea what he was talking about. It seemed to have gotten tangled around his tongue as he set eyes on the regal-looking gentleman, who was maybe fifty, broad-shouldered and fit with the loveliest silver-strewn hair and warm cinnamon eyes that made Will feel oddly at home.

“No need to trouble yourself, Will. I have so many suits,” Will’s new crush said, but the pushy guy was back, emphatically disagreeing.

“Oh, no,” Will breathed. He stepped closer, eyes going wide at the sight of the button now dangling from the handsome man’s shirt, right in the middle between firm, hairy chest and adorably soft tummy, *god help him*-- “You’ve lost a button. I think I have a sewing kit in my bag, but it’s -- shit, I left it in the staff office. Fuck, I didn’t mean to swear, I mean--Jesus--”

Motherfucker!

“Will,” the Handsome Man replied, so quietly sensuous, enveloping Will with his attentiveness, “It’s quite alright. I can easily have it mended or simply purchase another.”

The tone of his voice made it sound like the subject matter was more sultry than it actually was.

“That’s not the *point*, your majesty,” Frederick claimed, making Will’s breath catch.

Your MAJESTY? What the...

The nice-seeming bearded guy argued, “Of course it is, Frederick, especially given that the master is in charge not only of you, but the entire country of Lithuania. He makes the decisions, especially with regard to his person and any disciplinary action when it is harmed."

Will just kept staring at the royal man with stars in his eyes and confusing waves of arousal coursing through him because the debonair gentleman was most certainly staring back, even licking his full, tempting lips and tilting his head to one side in deeper appraisal.

“I haven’t been harmed,” he replied with quiet but undeniable authority. Still, his eyes remained on Will, seeming content to continue looking.

“Of course you have! What if that coffee had been burning hot, you might have sustained a serious injury. This brat of a maid comes barreling down the hall of the *Ritz,* mind you, like a bat out of hell and --” Frederick pointed accusingly at Will, possibly disappointed when the young man barely noticed him or his threatening tone.

Will’s new fantasy boyfriend sighed, finally looking at Frederick with condescending dismay. And Will felt the loss of eye contact like a punch to the stomach.

“Frederick,” said His Royal Sexiness, “Your aggression is doing more to mar my morning than anything else.”

“King Hannibal, you cannot be so dismissive of such misconduct. This young man should lose his job as a result of his wanton destruction.”

“His wanton destruction of...my suit?” *King* Hannibal chuckled softly and patted Frederick on the shoulder, simultaneously scolding and soothing.

More fireworks of jealousy flashed in Will’s eyes and he realized that there was some new, entire system within him which was single-handedly controlled by (King?!) Hannibal, a perfect stranger. It was insane and so was he; he was also going to hell for the fantasies he fully intended to enjoy when he was alone that night in bed.

With Hannibal’s smallest gesture or expression, he seemed able to casually throw Will into a new shade of ecstasy or misery, and yeah. This was going to be a problem, but anyway, it seemed to be his turn to speak.

“Um, I don’t mind paying for it,” he said sheepishly, “It might take a little time…”

Oh God shut up. Never speak again.

Hannibal’s mouth turned up in the most beguiling, teasing smile. “I can wait. But again, no further reparation on your part is needed.”

“Let it go, Frederick,” Hannibal insisted, again so quietly commanding, Will’s stomach felt all fluttery while his pants were tighter than he remembered, Good fucking Lord this was an embarrassment on a whole other scale than he’d experienced in his illustrious past career in embarrassment.

He was getting so inappropriately turned on and nervous, but somehow he managed to add before the sex god in the ruined suit walked off on a cloud of majestic-ness towards his crystal kingdom in the sky, or whatever:

“Um, excuse me your, er, highness?”

“Yes, Will?” Hannibal took a step forward, hands tucked behind his back, expression politely expectant, something naughty and teasing brewing in his eyes.

“I…” He looked up into those beautiful eyes again and almost swooned. “What country are you the king of? Sorry, I must seem childishly ignorant of European monarchies.”

“This is King Hannibal of Lithuania,” groaned Frederick, defeated but still annoyingly *there* behind his royal employer, trying to ruin the mood, whatever the mood was. Will liked whatever it was.

“Oh! Lithuania, of course,” he nodded rapidly as if he even remembered where on the map of Europe Lithuania was. And then, realizing with a startled regret he should have already done it, he attempted a wobbly curtsey sort of thing that caused him a slight stumble.

“What were you attempting to do there?” Hannibal asked, catching Will easily in his strong arms. He smelled like spicy cologne, mystery, and heaven. And he was warm, solid, his grip on Will a bit tighter than necessary. His fucking *hands*! Alarm bells sounded in Will as he

gawked up at his rescuer. He also had a weakness for men with nice hands, and this king with his seductive accent and powerful almost-embrace had big, equally powerful hands lined in veins. The hands were all over Will's arms, adjusting the hold to help Will stand up straight again.

Well, not straight. About a universe away from that, at least.

"It was like a...bow or curtsey?"

"You needn't resort to such formalities," Hannibal chuckled with a graceful good humor that did him credit. "It only makes me feel a bit odd to be fawned over by strangers. I prefer direct interaction on equal footing."

"But you're, uh…" Will's mouth had gone dry again. "I mean, it's just that you're so…"

high above me, so dignified and sophisticated. I'm just me, how could I be on equal footing?"

"Royal," he said aloud, cringing.

"We all have our foibles," King Hannibal replied with an almost fond-seeming look which Will convinced himself he must have imagined. He definitely didn't crush-hallucinate the next thing that happened, though.

The King *winked* at him, actually winked, before walking down the hall towards the penthouse suite, where he would most likely pick out a new suit for the day. His advisers, or whatever, were still trailing the king and arguing, but Hannibal didn't seem to remember they were even there.

Is it too much to ask for a sweet dream?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

"*Fired?*" Will repeated in shock and disbelief. "C'mon Kade, you can't be serious."

"It's Ms. Prurnell, actually, but then you've never shown appropriate respect for authority, Will." She put her hands on her hips and made him feel about two inches tall.

And after such a promising morning. Even his thoughts had devolved back to sarcastic mockery, busy looking for a reason this must be his fault, just like everything else that ever went wrong. Who needed enemies with thoughts like these?

Kade snapped her fingers in front of him as he hazed out to his complicated thoughtstream, a pendulum sweep of highs and lows. "Hello, Will. Remember me? I'm still your boss for about another minute, so you could at least bother listening – I am required to explain my reasons for letting you go."

Just bring King Hannibal back. I'll show him some proper respect for authority. A much, much nicer thought full of naughty inspirations.

When you were never actually going to sleep with someone, the fantasies were *so* much more fun -- after all, what lover lived up to the idea of sex with them you concocted on your own?

Sex was like Christmas, Will reasoned: great in theory, disappointingly empty whenever you really got into it.

And he was in the middle of getting fired, so he should put up more of a fight, but instead he let it go.

"Well, you've never been a particularly good boss to me, *Kade,*" he snapped, finally letting out months of irritation on the subject. "Consider it a little quid quo pro."

"You're nothing. You crawled out from under some rock in a swamp in the south and made your way to the big city with all your *hopes and dreams*, but you can't make something out of nothing." She cast him a cold smirk.

"Well! At least I'm not mean!" Will called after her back as she stalked off, clicking her high heels on the shining floor.

She disappeared into her office and Will went into the lobby and sat down with a dejected sigh. He supposed she would probably have him turned out into the streets like a Dickensian school boy if he lingered in the guest accommodations too long. Well, twas the season, after all.

He was so embarrassed and disappointed; at least this job let him pay *some* of his living expenses, and the gang at home were already doing too much to help him hold up his end of

things.

The time for art, from being nowhere in sight, had gone to all he had, and he was too damn depressed to hold a pencil now.

“Excuse me, Mr. Graham, is it?”

Will looked up from the chair of shame to see one of King Hannibal’s companions standing before him with a sympathetic, nearly apologetic expression.

“Oh, please, call me Will. Did you get lost? I know there’s so many floors and turns in this place. I can help you get back to the penthouse if--”

The man smiled at Will’s automatic response of caring assistance, even in his own upsetting circumstances.

“Will, then. May I join you?”

“Yes, please do,” Will offered, beyond confused but happy to accept friendly company. He gestured to the chair beside his own. “They may wait longer before kicking me out if I have a royal advisor next to me.”

“Oh, I’m not an advisor,” the bearded man laughed, sitting down and giving Will a discerning once-over. He seemed to come to a sort of conclusion. “My name is Abel Gideon, and I’m the butler at Castle Lecter. I’m in charge of the castle staff and oversee household affairs. The master takes me along on business trips because I’m a great buffer for Frederick Chilton’s arrogant nonsense. *He’s* the advisor, I’m afraid.”

“Well, if you need to vent about unpleasant coworkers, I totally get it.”

“It *is* irksome that Frederick remains so ingrained in the day to day, but then his majesty’s father, the previous king, believed he was a great advisor. And the master has this unceasing ambition to live up to his father’s expectations. I guess it’s his way of missing the deceased king. Entirely understandable, but not without consequence.”

“His, um, majesty seems so sure of himself,” Will noted, surprised to hear of this situation. “I can’t believe he’d keep on staff he doesn’t like or respect.”

“As King Hannibal noted earlier, we all have our foibles. His uncertainty on certain key matters has only grown since the death of his wife two years ago.”

“Oh, no, I’m so sorry to hear,” Will straightened up in his seat with new, sad attentiveness, forgetting his own troubles again just that easily.

“Yes, she was a lovely woman and we all grieve her deeply,” Abel explained. “King Hannibal’s melancholy has...bled into his confidence as a ruler. His ongoing grief for his father, now compounded with the death of his wife and becoming a single parent with so much pressure on him coming from many directions…”

“I can’t blame him for feeling overwhelmed.” Will sighed. “That’s a lot for anyone to handle, but then all the outside judgement and expectations…”

“Indeed. Under the circumstances, the King behaves exceedingly well. But of course, he is a great King, much more than he realizes. He has a certain haughty arrogance about him which is his birthright, little Abigail has it too...but his heart is so good, you see.”

“I do.” Will smiled. “It’s one of the only good things I’ve seen today.”

“Ah, I’ve wandered slightly off topic, but to get back to my original point: am I mistaken, or did I overhear you being fired?”

“Yes, I...am jobless.” Will reminded himself of this with a resigned shrug and a more dejected sigh. “Back to the drawing board of life for me.”

“Perhaps not. Tell me,” Abel remarked, leaning a bit closer with a conspiratorial smile, “Are you good with children?”

***

“A new au pair?” Hannibal asked, looking up from the many letters on his desk that evening. “So soon after the last one fled in terror? I thought we were to tackle *that* challenging task after the holidays.”

Amusement shimmered in his eyes as he awaited Abel’s explanation about the new hiring.

Abel explained, brimming with enthusiasm, “I know the princess has a tendency to prank and avoid her au pairs until they lose their patience with the job, but I believe I may have finally met her match. An au pair who can handle your daughter with kindness but meet her sass with plenty of his own. Oh! And he can teach her to paint.”

“He?” Hannibal’s interest piqued even more. He set aside his reading glasses and turned to fully face his butler. “Who is this ingenious new nanny, then?”

“You’ve met him, actually. He spilled coffee all over you this morning. And you…practically seemed ready to thank him for it.”

“Will Graham?” Hannibal rose from his chair as if Will himself had entered the room, his excitement so apparent that Abel grinned and congratulated himself on a triple victory in this hiring.

Abel had three reasons for offering Will the job of au pair to Princess Abigail. One, the poor lad had been fired, all due to Frederick’s meddling no doubt, a serious consequence for such an innocent accident, a consequence which was entirely undeserved. Anyone could see he was a nice young man.

With his youthful vigor and intelligence, Abel also had a feeling he was up to the task of confronting the princess’ wickedest pranks.

Perhaps most importantly, the master had noticed Will Graham with a *level* of notice which Abel had not seen from him in a long time. That spirit of impetuous curiosity which used to make the younger Hannibal so charming, a stand-out among royal snobs and hangers-on, it came back into the King's face when he spoke with the handsome lad.

It was about time the King learned to live again, and while Abel had no particular, preconceived notion it must come from a new love, this seemed too rare an opportunity for him to ignore. Watching the master endure a sad Christmas would surely ruin his own, and for those of the staff who also adored their ruler, it would be equally true.

"I take it you checked his qualifications," Hannibal assumed, recovering from his first reaction and going back inside his kingly demeanor of impeccable coolness.

He sat back down and lifted the pen to the next letter, but did not particularly make out the contents on the paper, merely pretending he was writing anything of significance.

"Of course, your majesty. Will is thirty-one, never married, originally from Louisiana and an orphan. A lifelong hard worker, he has an associate's degree in business but moved to New York to attend art school. His scholarship fell through when he wasn't able to make up the rest of his tuition and he had to wait to pursue that dream. Since then, his bank account has dwindled whilst he attempted to make ends meet as a waiter, a sales clerk and a dog walker before taking the post as a housekeeper in this place. Will's persistent efforts towards success among such difficulties reveal his strong nature and his integrity. He isn't in a current relationship," Abel continued with a puckish smirk, "And has three roommates, close friends who he considers his only family."

"I see." Hannibal admired the row of meaningless curly cues and hearts he had been compiling on the best royal stationary, the shining black ink blinking up at him while he added, "*Will Graham*" several times. He smiled. There appeared to be a funny sort of warmth occupying his cheeks. *he isn't in a current relationship.*

"Well, if you believe the young man is up to the job, I can only defer to your wisdom despite my pitying him for having to fly to Europe to look after a little girl who will prove, at the very least, a troublesome charge."

"You're rather proud of what a troublesome charge the princess can be, and decidedly bad at hiding it, sir."

Hannibal looked up at Abel again and gave a microscopic nod of assent to the observation. "A father's privilege, surely."

"Indeed. And bear in mind, despite Princess Abigail's more rebellious virtues, this job will do the young man a great deal of good. Otherwise, he should be left penniless to spend a sad and lonely Christmas and New Year."

"Hmm." Hannibal turned the paper over and cleared his throat, running his index finger under the collar of his dark blue silk pajama shirt. He began a new composition, upon the subject of "*what am I doing, this is a very bad idea, when shall I see him again,*" and other such self-remonstrance mixed with hope. "The job would initially be a trial run?"

“Yes, and should Mr. Graham prove equal to the work of educating and looking after your daughter, you might offer him a permanent position.”

Abel had been standing for several minutes with his hands folded neatly in front of him, smiling and sharing these facts in a manner altogether too pleased, and Hannibal certainly knew what his butler was about. Slightly miffed pride and definite embarrassment at being so obviously engaged in an immature and foolish “crush at first sight” were undercut by gratitude and reciprocal amusement.

But they both stopped smiling when Hannibal asked, “And what of Lady Du Maurier? Is she still planning to join us for the Christmas ball? I know Frederick considered the photo op a mandatory gesture for the good of my subjects.”

Abel sighed. “Sadly, yes, she is expected. As charming a...creature as her ladyship may be, I’ve never approved of the way Frederick and the rest of the Parliament insist on advertising your so-called relationship to the public, as if you’re already engaged.”

“It does put me in a precarious position.” Hannibal had written the name “*Bedelia*" and crossed it out, frowning. “How can I know my own heart’s desire when I must please thousands of subjects who all depend on my domestic bliss for their sense of security and peace in life? I don’t know how Father bore out with these pressures. I seem ill-suited to the task, equally as Abigail’s last nanny struggled to pass muster.”

“That would be the nanny who emerged from her shower to discover her hair had been dyed neon pink?” Abel covered a laugh with a cough into his hand.

“Rather a nice shade of pepto bismol, I thought, but she felt otherwise.” Hannibal folded up the “letter” and placed it absent-mindedly in the pocket of his shirt.

“Would you like me to post that letter for you, sir?” Abel’s eyes twinkled and Hannibal blushed deeper.

“No need, Abel, I’m…still working on it.”

“Your highness, if you don’t mind my saying, if there was ever a perfect time for you to discover your own heart’s desire, something tells me this Christmas might be it.”

Hannibal remained composed aside from the half-dreamy, half-terrified twitch about his lips and his pink cheeks. “For all of our sakes, I hope so.”

***

“Hann…His majesty won’t be joining us on the flight back to Lithuania?” Will asked, disappointed as he stood in the private air field with his one poor little suitcase clamped tightly in his hand.

Abel shook his head, smiling as if he knew a secret or two that might interest Will. “No, he had to fly on ahead with several other staff to meet with the duke and duchess of –”

“What in God’s name is this unruly little scamp doing here, about to board *our* plane?” Frederick Chilton had apparated beside them as it appeared, although by the way he struggled to catch his breath in the chilly night air, it was obvious he must have sprinted to catch up out of sheer spite.

“Will Graham is my name, actually.” Will raised his eyebrows and shook his head with a soft chuckle. “In case you forgot. And I work for the King now, as au pair to Princess Abigail, so you’re going to have to revise your attitude towards me or it’s gonna be a difficult Christmas for us all.”

Frederick turned scarlet with indignation, otherwise looking proper as could be in his designer brown trenchcoat; the fur trim doubtless genuine and making for a pretentious touch. He adjusted his own grip on his rigid briefcase and gave Will another fast examination, his light eyes flaring in disapproval.

Will rolled his eyes, feeling like a science specimen under a microscope or settling in for a test he was doomed to fail, and well-used to the experience. He never seemed to pass anyone’s test of worthiness, and if he had, he’d be an established New York artist by now instead of a thirty-something nanny (apparently).

But he happened to like his woodsy-brown colored winter coat with its plaid flannel lining, the same way he liked his old faded jeans and his grey gloves that had a few small holes in them. He happened to like himself on better days, and if he was flying to his royal sexiness and getting a new beginning after so much pining for just that – excitement, adventure, maybe even love – this was a good day.

“Explain,” Frederick demanded of Abel, his voice brittle as the frigid air that swirled in light snow all around them.

“We’re lucky the snow is going to be minimal this evening,” Abel noted to Will, ignoring Frederick completely. That seemed to Will like a damn good habit to possibly get into himself. “The flight is projected to be uneventful and entirely safe – a good time to get some sleep, Will. Trust me, you’ll need it.”

“I’m not afraid of the Princess.” How could he be, if she was Hannibal’s daughter? By consequence of this mere fact, Will was earnestly predisposed to love her, no matter how rebellious and difficult she proved.

Will laughed pleasantly and followed Abel onto the plane as Frederick followed behind them, grumbling something about “*that pathetic, Old Navy model of a supposed royal employee, how dare…*”

“Oh, do you have Old Navy in Lithuania?” Will smirked again as he settled into his comfortable leather seat on the small but luxurious plane.

There were only four seats for passengers behind the pilot, so that Frederick was forced to sit face to face with the young man he had dubbed rather pointlessly his new enemy. Yanking his shiny brown driving gloves off and thrusting them into his lap with a sneer, he snapped to Will, “You simply won't fit into our world. The mere thought is ridiculous."

“Would you like champagne?” Abel asked Will, opening a cold can from a cute little refrigerator nestled conveniently into the seating area. He gestured with two plastic cups as the plane began gently moving forward, preparing for ascent. “We have cheese and crackers as well, and fresh fruit.”

“Oh, awesome, I’m starved,” Will enthused, rubbing his stomach over his green plaid shirt which had been revealed when he shrugged off the brown overcoat.

“Are you wearing two layers of ugly plaid flannel?” Frederick complained. “Laughable.”

“I’m not even going to ask how someone as aggressively repugnant as you rose to a position of power within the Lithuanian government and monarchy,” Will said wryly, taking a sip of refreshing bubbly wine as he looked out the window into the lovely, starry black sky dotted with stars that seemed say this trip would bring him to his destiny.

“History is littered with countless cases of men who simply bullied their way into positions of influence. But if you’re looking to get a rise out of me, rest assured, I’ve been bullied all my life and you have to work harder to make me care that you think I’m some unqualified loser with a bad wardrobe. His majesty seems to like me just fine, anyway.”

Will nibbled a buttery cracker topped with sharp cheddar from the small plate which Abel had kindly passed him. “And that’s what matters. King Hannibal approved Abel’s decision to hire me as Abigail’s new au pair.”

Frederick put on a black satin sleep mask and a pair of noise-blocking headphones, then switched on his chosen audio, which appeared to be loud opera music. He put his seat back and crossed his arms over his chest. “I don’t know what his majesty has been *smoking* since you rammed your little cart into him this morning, but when we arrive back at the castle, I intend to follow up on the matter.”

“Goodnight, Frederick,” Abel chirped amusedly. “How about a movie, Will? *It’s a Wonderful Life* is one of my favorites.”

He nodded at a nice big screen mounted on the opposite wall and Will grinned. “Perfect. Feels like Christmas already.”

***

Will slept all the way to Lithuania after he finished his snack and drink, plus the inspirational story of George Bailey that always restored his faith in Christmas miracles of redemption.

His breath was terrible when he woke up, despite the rush job he'd done the night before of brushing his teeth and mouthwash with the small travel amenities he’d thrown into his bag from the dollar shelf at Target – it had been a fast turnaround between getting hired and getting ready to fly away to a completely different world than he’d ever known. He barely had any decent clothes as he’d been wearing little else during the days and nights but his housekeeper uniform, and sheepishly he had to agree his wardrobe was badly in need of an upgrade.

(He wanted to look good, smell good, be on his best behavior when he saw Hannibal again. No mess-ups or mishaps this time. Right. Despite the fact that he was about ninety-nine percent certain kings didn't sleep with their employees, especially awkward ones who would never fit into their fancy world. He was afraid to let the "affair" fantasy progress further, since the mere thought of him as a royal consort was dually exhilarating and setting himself up for a terrible heartbreak)

In fact, he'd barely had time to explain his sudden departure to Brian, Jimmy and Beverly, and as he yawned and fished around in his pockets for gum, Will could still picture his three roommates looking at each other in bafflement, repeating, "*Royal Au Pair*?"

All the way to the castle, Will stared out the window of the big, royal luxury car in fascination, asking Abel questions about the area, which so far contained rolling countryside blanketed in snow and often occupied with waving, excited folks who recognized the familiar vehicle as belonging to the monarchy. He felt like a celebrity! Even with Frederick sulking in his own corner of the car, perhaps even more so. Nothing could hold him back now – not even a powerful new nemesis determined to get his ass packed back to the US by Christmas Eve.

He didn't come all the way here to fail, not again, not now.

"I've never been outside the states before," he marveled, waving back as some more countryfolk paused while plowing their snowy fields to shout greetings of Merry Christmas to the car.

At least, he assumed that was the sentiment. "*Linksmų šventų Kalėdų*!" certainly sounded a lot nicer than whatever Frederick was thinking. His resting bitch face intensified as he muttered, "They can't see you, *Mr. Graham.* The window is tinted for privacy, of course."

"Of *course,*" Will blushed, consoling himself with a fantasy of what he and the king might get up to in such a car, and the naughtiness of his visions had him rubbing sweaty palms on his jeans.

Then the car turned a corner at the top of a hill and drove through enormous gilded gates into a huge circular driveway, in front of which lay the Castle, a perfect fairy tale of a structure, elegant tall towers and old but strong-looking brick and stone. Several staff awaited their arrival at the front entrance, and Will tried to close his mouth and look less impressed with the setting as he made their acquaintance.

The head maid and cook seemed friendly enough, and Will started to calm down a bit, but curiosity furrowed his brow. "And where is Princess Abigail?"

"Hiding?" guessed Daina, a forty-something maid with a "tough but fair" demeanor. "Perhaps in the library, under the table with the atlases."

"Or in the attic, under a rug, reading and eating green apples," ventured Tomas, the cook, who was about Daina's age, stocky with a black mustache and lingering glances in the maid's direction which seemed to go unnoticed by her.

“She’ll avoid you as long as possible before the pranks begin,” Abel advised. “Come, then, Will, we’ll give you the grand tour.”

“I beg you would excuse me,” Frederick put in, stalking off towards the opposite end of the front hall before making a fast path up a tall, circular staircase. His unusually polite address was obviously suspicious.

“He must have prisoners in the dungeons to torture,” Will laughed, “But then why is he going *up*stairs?”

“He’s up to no good, whatever the activity,” Abel determined, his happy expression going more steely. “Stay on your guard when he inevitably does his best to get you fired, but otherwise ignore his nonsense.”

Abel ushered Will down the hall, past an absolutely stunning, big Christmas tree that sparkled with countless red lights like rubies, but still needed ornaments to be complete. Meanwhile, Frederick went into his own room and closed the door behind him.

With a determined and flinty look, he took out his phone and sent a pointed text message to the Lady Du Maurier, who was still in London on a pre-Christmas holiday. *You’d best come asap. New competition in the castle. We will need to cement the official news of your engagement to the King to prevent disaster.*

The King’s popularity, while still intact, and in many cases flourishing out of longtime loyalty and his sterling reputation – in some quarters had diminished, and along with it the royal fortune. His majesty would scarcely be able to deny, once his feet were to the fire Frederick intended to bring into play, that the kingdom needed a royal consort of the *best*, most elite and wealthy background and breeding. Lady Du Maurier was the ideal candidate; it only remained to bring it about before that tousel-headed boy caused any more trouble.

He collapsed into the chair in front of his desk, under a stained glass window spotted with fluffy, late December snow, the kind he used to love as a boy, whenever that had been. The picture of autocratic isolation, he smiled grimly when he received a reply from her ladyship a few minutes later.

“*I’m on my way.*”

***

“Holy shit,” Will breathed in disbelief when he was alone in his new rooms – yes, *rooms.*

Instead of a cramped space the size of a closet which barely fit his bed and scant belongings, Will was now the resident of a royal suite. The bedroom, resplendent in shades of cool blue and deep gold, featured a large and cushy canopy bed with a heavy duvet whose tassels draped elegantly to the blue and red paisley rug. An actual crystal *chandelier* hung over the bed, and his bureau and closet were large enough to fit three times worth of his clothing and simple grooming implements.

A gorgeously plush blue bathrobe had been provided for him, clearly brand new and feeling like absolute heaven against his naked skin after he took a nice, hot shower in the biggest fucking shower he had *ever* seen, much less indulged his time in. The water pressure, the continual hot water, the lack of anyone banging on the door telling him he was out of time – *God*, who lived like this, who was allowed?

The shower alone would be luxury enough to substantiate a vacation for Will. He moaned a soft sigh as he wrapped himself in the robe and stuck his bare feet into matching slippers, like walking on clouds. In front of the mirror, he ran his fingers through his curls, thoughtfully noticing the complimentary products which had been placed out for him. There were hair pomades, colognes, shaving supplies, combs in three different sizes and a brush that looked fit for a queen, large and gold; he was almost afraid to touch it.

He soon discovered, with a merry laugh, that his tube of toothpaste was full of silly string. After squirting it all over the sink trying to put toothpaste on his brush, he tossed it in the trash and used the toothpaste he had packed for the trip instead.

Abigail, really. Amateur-level roasting.

After dressing, with slight regret at leaving behind the bathrobe, Will checked under the bed pillows and blankets, predictably removing several fake but realistic slithery snakes, lizards and spiders. He placed them in the Christmas gift bag which Beverly had thrust at him yesterday while he hurried to catch his flight. Since he'd removed the sketchpad and pencils – charcoal and watercolor sets – she had given him, placing them on his new desk, the bag was free. It seemed a suitable place to keep Abigail's various "gifts."

A knock at the door made him jump, fearing it was the King, dying for it to be the King, and overall feeling silly. He opened it, however, to reveal a snobby elderly man with even stiffer posture than Frederick. A long tape measure was thrown about his neck like a silk scarf, and he wore a perfect three piece suit like the kind Hannibal always had on. Will had read…a few…articles and google imaged a few times just educating himself on Hannibal, and his takeaway had been that the King was always dressed to impress and make his mouth water.

"I am Cornelius, the royal tailor," said Cornelius, the royal tailor (apparently), inviting himself into Will's room while the young man stepped back, intrigued and not particularly insulted by the rude entry or Cornelius' offended look at his thrown-on henley and jeans.

"We'll just have to take care of…this," he noted, pointing at Will in a general sort of way. "Immediately, if not sooner." He clapped his hands and five more staff came in, rolling in rack after rack of men's clothes which a glance told Will were about his size.

"So, I can't really actually afford…we shouldn't tailor anything for me specifically, uh…I don't even know if I'm keeping the job yet…" He scratched his bearded jaw with a wince, but Cornelius looked at him in frustration.

"My good young man, his majesty sent us and said we are to spare no expense, and of course you aren't expected to pay for the new wardrobe. As a part of the royal household, you are simply to be held to a higher standard of appearance – in fact the very highest."

“The clothes go with the job,” one of the maids whispered.

“Oh…” Will blushed as if Hannibal was there in person, at hearing Cornelius say “*his majesty sent us and said we are to spare no expense…*"

It sounded…so *Daddy,* as if *his royal highness* was marking and pampering the younger au pair, and Will had to remind himself that his own imagination was notoriously outlandish and immersive, so that he wouldn’t forget common sense. The clothes went with the job, after all, and surely that was all there was to the extravagant gift…

Unless?

***

More Christmas decorations were delivered that afternoon, and Abel asked Will if he’d mind helping the staff carry in the many boxes of tasteful baubles and bows with which the castle interior would soon be draped. It was a week till Christmas, and there was simply no time to waste on procrastinating the decor, although as Abel said, the master had shown no interest in the project he used to supervise.

“King Hannibal has a flawless eye for design, evident both in his former hobby of interior decorating and his other talents for cooking and drawing, and playing his instruments,” Abel hurriedly gave Will some more Hannibal exposition as they bustled back and forth with the boxes and stacked them in the front hall. “Theramin and harpsichord.”

Will almost dropped the latest box, which was brimming over with tinsel that for God’s sake looked like it had real gold flecks in it. “He draws?”

“Very well, although he’s private about his sketches and prefers to keep them to himself.” Abel followed Will back outside, both men’s cheeks cherry red from the cold, sweat of labor making Will’s curls stick to his forehead.

He could smell the citrus and vanilla of the luxurious pomade which he had used earlier to *somewhat* style his fluffy and mind-of-its-own hair, and it made him smile, just like the waft of the matching aftershave and the way his new suit felt on his body. Weird to embrace this feeling that Hannibal was holding him when he dressed up and styled himself as the King had insisted, yet also unavoidable and more than exciting.

As he contemplated these thoughts, an enormous and very wet snowball suddenly smacked right into his forehead, so big it caked half his face in snow. He cried out in surprise and turned on his heel towards the direction the attack had come from, just as another big snowball hit him on the forehead. He heard a squeal of mischief and saw a little girl running away around the side of the castle, just a fast blur of long, russet hair and a lavender coat.

“Just wait, Abigail,” He called, “You’re not ready for the revenge you have coming your way! I’m a world-renowned snowball fighter and you’re in way over your–”

“Eh, Will,” Abel muttered, tugging Will’s sleeve as the young man shouted at the top of his lungs at the retreating figure, who was heard giggling in reply.

Will turned around, beet-red in the face and soaked from the top of his head to his coat shoulder in melting snow, to see that his majesty, King Hannibal of Lithuania, stood before him with a questioning expression on his noble face.

Hannibal looked as much like a royal sex god as Will recalled both from experience and the *few* photos he'd *glanced casually* at over last twenty-four hours or so. He gulped, blue eyes flitting nervously over the expectant, handsome face and the dapper attire, featuring a double-breasted black coat with the collar popped.

The coat looked almost like a soldier's, with two rows of bright silver buttons on the front, and Jesus fucking Christ it worked. It clung lovingly to Hannibal's frame, accentuating his broad shoulders and fit but strong build. Will's mind stopped processing thought for five full seconds.

"Uh," he offered as Hannibal looked back at him, sternly this time.

He tried to make up for it with a bow, only to remember his majesty disliked the gesture, and stopping midway only made him look more awkward. "Sorry, I didn't know you were, um. There," he cringed.

Hannibal had this way of making Will feel younger than he was, and at present he felt like a kid put on time out, too overwhelmed by the heat of his employer's disapproving gaze to feel annoyed by the phenomenon.

"Apparently not. Please be so good as to accompany me indoors to my personal office."

Hannibal turned fluidly and walked inside, leaving Will to stumble his way after him, cursing all facets of life, especially that the King seemed entirely uninterested in Will's new clothes, quilted black leather jacket over a midnight blue zip-up sweater, and under that a white shirt and cranberry tie, then blue trousers which he had cried foul on the tailoring of earlier. He was sure the tailor had arranged them too tight, but they weren't uncomfortable or anything, just sort of…showy. Ahem. And he had these lovely new glossy tan loafers, even his socks were luxurious, and all this to end up eating humble pie sitting in front of the King's desk like he was in the principal's office.

Increasingly miffed, Will sat there with an accusing look until Hannibal noticed, holding court over the extravagantly decorated office with his big hands folded on the desk, his cinnamon gaze enveloping Will all over again. He had slipped out of the Soldier Coat thing and now sat in his full suited glory, this time a brown pin-striped one worn over a blue and white striped shirt, which should *not* work but totally did. Of course it did!

The king gave a confusing, complicated sigh. "So, Will Graham. We meet again."

Will narrowed his eyes. "So we do. You don't seem happy to see me among your staff for the holidays, your majesty. So sorry to have earned your disapproval in approximately thirty seconds, prior to me actually even meeting your daughter, the princess."

"It isn't that I regret giving you the job, or that I'm not happy to see you." Hannibal snapped the words, but they eased Will's own annoyance considerably. "Honestly, Will. You are

meant to be the source of authority and model proper conduct for Abigail. Yet here you are, behaving with outlandish childishness in public. Ironically, it's *you* who clearly deserves a good spanking."

Will's mind malfunctioned again and he had to stifle a moan as the rumbling words fell over him like a blanket of lust.

"Well? I'm sure you have something to say for yourself, you usually do from what I can gather on our brief acquaintance." Hannibal reached for a file on his desk and placed a pair of reading glasses on his nose.

"You…wear *glasses*, too?" Will demanded, actually upset at this point.

The tug of war inside him was being actively aggravated on both ends of resentment and horniness by this intoxicating older man, and it wasn't fair.

"Too?" Hannibal asked, confused, reading a paper that had been in the file.

"Just. Wouldn't you like to know what I meant by that? Humph. Sort of thing I'd tell a *friend,* not a stranger, slash employer, slash king." He crossed his arms sullenly, causing his sweater to lift a bit, showing off his toned stomach in the tight white dress shirt and the lines of his slender hips and ample, barely held off arousal, in the equally glued-to-him pants.

Hannibal had looked up at the au pair and was silent for a few moments. The blank look on his face made Will smugly wonder if his brain had stopped working, too. *Ha! Vengeance is mine.*

"Very well, then." Properly, with infuriating properness in fact, Daddy – Ahem *the King* – read from the file apparently all about Will fucking Graham (he had a *file*?) "It says here that you were let go from your last few jobs over concerns of temper tantrums with customers, a pattern of lateness, and mouthing off to your employers. Abel failed to bring this to my attention earlier, I can't imagine why."

"Oh? So sorry. Sorry I have little patience with customers who treat me like trash and even less with bosses who *degrade* me. I don't care for being undervalued while I bust my butt serving others for pennies I don't even get to *keep.* Forgive me, your eminence. I can go and pack my bags at once."

He started to get up, but Hannibal said firmly, "Sit down, right now. Infuriating boy."

Will, more than a little annoyed at how good it felt to be scolded by, and to obey the King, *obeyed.*

"I didn't mean that I was planning to let you go, after you've traveled all this way, have just lost your job at the hotel – partially my fault – and haven't really had a chance to show how good of an au pair you will or will not be, directly working with Abigail." Looking hard into Will's eyes, Hannibal crumpled up the file, page by page and tossed it into the small trash can next to his desk.

The king added thoughtfully, “They say this time of year is a time of renewal and second chances.”

“I don’t need a second chance, I just need a fair shake,” Will replied anxiously. “For once, to be valued and respected, *allowed* to do things my own way and see how I can prove myself worthy of…all of it. Security, a place to feel I belong, time and space for my art. That’s it, you know?”

“I’d very much like to see your art sometime,” Hannibal said, much more softly, taking Will by surprise. The glasses, combined with his sincere brown eyes and silver hair, had Will helplessly smitten.

“Well. Okay, maybe. I guess I’d like to see yours, too. Abel told me you draw.”

“Oh, sometimes.” Hannibal gave Will a smile which was unreadable except that he was obviously thinking about something quite specific and suggestive. Will had the oddest sensation almost mounting to certainty that he had been a subject for one of the King’s recent sketches.

His cheeks flamed. Hannibal watched intently, and several beats of silence elapsed in this manner before he rang a small bell on the desk and Abel appeared in the door.

“Yes, your majesty?”

“Go and fetch the princess and bring her in here, Abel. It’s time we sorted this out before poor Mr. Graham joins the ranks of her past victims.”

Abel nodded and walked off to perform the task; meanwhile Will complained, “I’m not so easily defeated, you know. I want to help Abigail, teach her, guide her, even have fun. It’s Christmas, after all, she could probably use the company.”

“I can see you are as formidable as I assumed during our memorable first encounter,” Hannibal observed coyly.

He unfolded, then refolded his large, vein-lined hands on the desk a few times, then moved his pens and papers around, avoiding that searing blue gaze. “But you’ll be expected in general to maintain a more decorous demeanor, particularly in setting an example for my daughter. Abigail’s teachers have always been expected to remain in the background and at the ready to help and guide her at our various dinners and balls, not actively arguing or sparring with the child, of course.”

“So, you want me to be invisible.”

Hannibal scoffed at that and bit his lower lip before saying with a darker gaze, “Somehow, I doubt you’re the invisible type, Will.”

“I guess it must be the snow-soaked look that does that.”

The king tilted his face just a tiny bit, but enough to silently issue a rebuke. Enough to say, *you know it’s a lot more than that.*

Abigail sulked in with her arms crossed, distressingly looking pretty much like Will had a few minutes ago, when he was supposed to be Adulting.

"*What,* Father?" she demanded primly. And now she sounded more like Hannibal.

"This is your new au pair, Mr. Will Graham. Shake hands and make friends, immediately."

"*Fine.* Whatever," she said in a tiny, sophisticated accent that was immediately endearing. She took off her small lavender mitten and held her hand out to Will.

"Right, maybe lose the buzzer first," Will snorted.

Abigail heaved a sigh as if she was a martyr and victim here and removed the gag buzzer from her palm, sticking it in her coat pocket and returning to shake the new au pair's hand with raised eyebrows. "Satisfied?"

"It's great to meet you, Princess Abigail," Will said with genuine, warm smile.

"Yes, well, however unavoidable," she huffed, every inch the small aristocrat.

"Abigail, you're to do as Will tells you, which right now I imagine would be establishing a daily course of study. If I hear of any more pranks and rudeness on your part, I will simply have to begin taking some of your favorite privileges away."

"What?" She scowled, "You never did that when I terrorized all the other teachers!"

"And I was wrong," Hannibal clarified. "I see that now. I've let you have your own way so often that your conduct has extended to the unacceptable."

"As if there is anything wrong with letting a girl have her own way!" Abigail was furious now, but a pain caught in her throat with the last few words. Will worried she might not know where her gravity came from if she didn't feel she was going to always *have her own way.*

There wasn't much else for a sheltered, proper young princess to hold onto in the absence of a mother, with a father who clearly loved her but struggled to know how to raise her alone.

"I'm sorry, but you cannot always have whatever you wish. You're still a child, and a very young one at that. If your mother was still here, she would know better how to handle your defiance and wildness–"

"She wouldn't *handle* me like a *problem!*" Abigail stomped her damp snow boot, casting small drops of slush on the perfect rug. "Mother had a sense of fun! She loved me the way I am!"

"As do I," Hannibal hastened to correct her, tenderness and hurt feelings covering his own hoarse tone. He got up and folded Abigail into his arms. "I'm sorry I haven't been the father to you I should, but I'm trying, I promise. I'll never stop trying."

"Okay, then." Abigail hugged her father and allowed a few pats to her back before she wrenched loose again. "Perhaps you might start by finding a way to remember what *fun* is.

Mother always knew."

Hannibal hung his head. Will had, for the last few minutes, felt he was an intruder on a private family scene, feeling badly for both of them without much to do to help.

"Abigail," he said brightly now, standing and holding out his hand. "Would you show me to the library? I thought we could begin today's lessons with literature. Have you read *Little Women*?"

"No," she sniffed, batting at her red eyes. "Is it any good?"

"It's wonderful," Will assured her, "Especially to read at Christmas. Come on, then. Give me a chance. I won't ask for more than that today."

He looked at Hannibal, who stood distraught but fighting for his own self-control, as if he had the weight of the world on his shoulders.

"That's all I'll ask of either one of you for now," he added softly to Hannibal.

The king nodded and returned to his desk, promptly getting back to work. They were clearly dismissed and Hannibal was just as clearly in terrible distress. It didn't matter anymore that they had mildly quarreled and Will had felt all those different colors of desire and bitterness. He wished he could give Hannibal a hug and tell him it was all going to be alright.

Chapter End Notes

Next time: Our boys share a romantic horseback riding evening under the stars, bringing them closer. And later...is it finally time for Will to get down on his knees in front of the King? 😈

Chance Encounters

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For days it seemed that Will could do nothing but run into Hannibal when he was doing the worst possible, most awkward thing to be running into Hannibal. He came off feeling like a hapless kid with a stupid crush every single time, all the while blathering utter nonsense to try and excuse said ridiculousness.

There was the morning Abigail complained about going to the library to begin her reading for the day, and Will tried to lighten the mood by saying they could stop for a while to admire the Christmas decorations which were still being placed all over the castle by the hard-working staff.

The ginormous tree in the front hall was so tall that Abel had to use a ladder to put the angel on top of it, and Will's heart was in his throat at the height the butler went to. "Whoa, Abel, that's steep."

"It's no problem for me, Will, I have this job every year." Abel smiled cheerfully and descended nimbly, hopping down and folding the ladder. "I'm putting this back in storage, Princess, before you begin getting any bright ideas about climbing it."

"I never even considered it," she sniffed, cute and prim in her bubblegum pink dress, complete with a white peter pan collar piped with delicate embroidered roses and a fluffy skirt.

While Abigail never failed to *look* the perfect princess, Will could tell, even after a mere week as her teacher, she always had tricks up her sleeves that were far from decorous.

So he wasn't surprised when she waited for Abel to leave, assisted by another servant in carrying the ladder outside, and for the huge, heavy golden door to close solidly, then smirked like the devil incarnate.

She scurried up to the tree and took down two shiny red ornaments, glass balls embossed with tiny, dainty silver crowns, each of which probably cost hundreds of dollars, or whatever that translated to in Lithuanian money.

"How far do you think you can roll this?" Abigail asked, holding the ornaments up with an excited flourish.

"C'mon, Abigail, you know you're only going to get both of us in trouble with a game like that." Will groaned. "Isn't there anything you like to do that's allowed?"

"Oh, *I* see. You have no sense of adventure."

She tossed one ornament up in the air and caught it easily, stalking around the foyer, as Will let out a panicked little cry when the ball was swirling through the air, in danger of a terrible shattering.

“That’s not true,” he frowned, “But as your teacher, I’m not going to encourage you to play with fragile, probably priceless –”

“Boooorrrring.” Abigail scuffed her mary jane heel on the floor and rolled her eyes. “You’re a fuddy duddy. Just like all the other au pairs.”

“I’m sorry, a *fuddy duddy?*” Will scoffed and took one of the ornaments from Abigail.

Judging by wherever he’d be able to get the best distance, he turned to the direction where the front hall opened into a longer corridor.

Then he leaned down as if he was bowling and aimed carefully before rolling the ornament, watching pridefully as it traveled smoothly all the way to the fourth door in the corridor.

“Ha, beat *that*," he challenged the princess, who giggled and clapped her pale hands excitedly.

“Oh, what fun!” She took a turn and did nearly as well, but the defeat made her crinkle her nose and up her game for the next round.

Will followed suit when she genuinely defeated him on her next roll, and soon they were playing more quickly and competitively, eventually so fluidly that they were able to carry on a conversation at the same time.

“Do you like Christmas?” he asked casually, peering at her from the corner of his eye. He noticed her face fall, as he had suspected.

“Mother always made Christmas so special. Now that she’s gone…” She shrugged her delicate shoulders. “I suppose I just don’t see the point. It’s nothing but a whole season designed for families. There’s just me, Father and his countless duties, and all the servants.”

“Well, now there’s me, too,” Will said, “Not that I’m saying I’m important, but if there’s any activities you want to do, let me know about it. Snowman building?”

“Snow *women,*” she retorted, rolling her ornament expertly, then traipsing off to the sixth door to retrieve it. When she got back, she asked almost shyly, “Hot cocoa with rainbow marshmallows? Then could we watch Rudolph?”

“Of course! How about this afternoon? I’ll ask Abel if we can use the screening room on the third floor.”

“It has a popcorn machine!” she enthused, her expression so brightened from its former melancholy that it broke Will’s heart.

She didn’t mean to be a rebel or troublemaker; she was just a frightened little girl who hadn’t come to grips with an unfathomable loss, that of the mother who had been the center of her

universe. Abigail was lonely.

Will didn't know much about families, but he was determined to do anything he could to make Christmas fun again for the charmingly mischievous princess with so much sad confusion in her azure eyes.

"Okay, two more rounds and then we are *going* to the library," he told her after they chatted some more about holiday traditions.

After Abigail did tremendously well on her turn, Will grinned and said, "It's all or nothing now!"

He gave it his best shot, sending the ornament rolling quickly down the soft, maroon-carpeted hall.

Hunched down to watch the ornament's progress and see if it went further than Abigail's, he only noticed they were no longer alone when the red glass ball ended its ambitious journey by colliding harmlessly against a chocolate brown, polished dress shoe.

With a wince, Will straightened slowly to a standing position, taking in the sight of the King, tall, perfect-suit, imposing as ever, staring at his daughter and the tutor with disdain.

"What in the world have you two been up to?" he asked, picking the two ornaments up and casting a quietly accusing look at Will.

He was unprepared for Will's gentle smile in return, and the effect was that the king's rigid posture turned more natural, if not quite relaxed. A bit of pink came into each royal cheek and the king looked truly baffled.

Even though he was still mortified by the whole "glass ornament bowling" thing and turning redder than the ornaments, Will had noticed how stiff and uncomfortable Hannibal seemed, as if his formality and adhesion to rules was the only defense he had against scary emotions. Emotions like loneliness. With his natural ability to read others' emotions, Will drew these conclusions and allowed them to influence his own response.

"Something we probably shouldn't be," he admitted, sheepish. "I take full responsibility, your highness. From now on, we'll take our athletic time in the gymnasium, with less fragile equipment."

"Indeed, and I take responsibility for overreacting. It's been a stressful few days. I'm happy you two are getting on so well," Hannibal replied, his eyes on Will automatically softening. "I –"

"Or we could go and play in the gardens!" Abigail chirped up, "Father, Will and I are going to build snow people later, then have hot cocoa with rainbow marshmallows and watch Rudolph and – won't you join in?"

"I wish I could," the king answered with genuine regret. "But unfortunately, I have meetings all afternoon, followed by an official dinner with the ambassador of–"

“Right.” Abigail glared at him and shook her head. “Fine. Come on then, Will, I’d like to start my reading now. Does Marmee let the girls become friends with Laurie after Jo meets him at the party?”

“Oh, yes,” Will smiled, taking the offered small hand and leading her down the hall towards the stairs that led to the huge, stunning library. “Laurie and the March sisters become very great friends and have many adventures together. He’s terribly excited because he’s never had a family before.”

On the way, they passed Hannibal, and he nodded with a special smile for the King, too, bashful and encouraging, gently saying without words, *don’t worry. You’re doing your best.* The glimmer of tenderness in his eyes added, *I’m here for you, anytime.* Words he was far too nervous to say aloud.

The king still looked crestfallen, but he kept looking into Will’s eyes as if he could not do otherwise, until the tutor and his charge rounded the next corner out of sight.

***

The next time Will ran into Hannibal at a weird moment, he was halfway up the grand spiral staircase at 1am with a bowl of ramen in his hands and one noodle hanging from his mouth, as he was so hungry that he had taken an eager bite right from the bowl with his mouth.

This resulted in him looking like he had the table manners of a toddler, and he wasn’t even at a table, which *might* not have improved the whole “shove his face in the noodles” moment very much.

Hannibal was on his way down the stairs as Will went up. He wore his fancy, plush bathrobe and a melancholy expression. They met in the middle, Will’s sudden presence in the quiet of the night startling the king out of his distracted state of sadness.

Will froze in place, once again extremely embarrassed. To quickly end the first problem (the curly noodles sticking out of his mouth), he slurped the ramen into his mouth, chewed and swallowed, turning a very familiar-by-now shade of crimson and thinking how to possibly explain himself.

To his surprise, instead of annoyance, Hannibal’s handsome face only showed pleasure at seeing him, and amusement at what he was up to.

“It is always something with you, Will, isn’t it?” he chortled, far too daddyish in that royal red bathrobe patterned with gold medallions.

Underneath, he wore silky white pj’s that Will really, really wanted to get a better look at. Whatever other mouth-watering features the p.j.’s showed off, the collar was unfastened and low enough that he once again glimpsed the strong, hairy chest he wanted to get his mouth and hands all over.

“Well. Do you ever get late night snack cravings? I mean, what are you doing up? Not to pry – I mean, sorry. I…”

Will toyed with the fork in his bowl, fumbling for anything decent to say. He wanted to keep the moment going and stay in the warmth of Hannibal's cinnamon gaze, smelling his spicy cologne and feeding the fantasies that were surely going to drench his dreams later.

"Every now and again I make myself an omelette," he answered, looking with an artist's fascination at Will's face, his gaze trailing over the younger man's features like the gentlest stroke of fingers. "Are those…instant noodles?"

"Well. Yeah." He shrugged, adding ruefully, "Abel was making a shopping list and asked all the staff if they needed anything in particular. I said, do you have ramen in Lithuania, and he said, everywhere has ramen."

Will was rambling. He was talking too fast, words blurring as the nervous chatter came from his sheer excitement at being alone with the king, at night, in their pjs, bowl o' noodles or not, this was exhilarating.

"I have an addiction, guess you could say," he blurted. "Started back in New York, when I couldn't afford anything else to eat, and even now, when your chefs here are serving the most amazing food I have ever tasted…I still get a little craving sometimes."

"A little craving?" Hannibal smiled, stepping just a bit closer. "I believe I saw you so impatient for a bite that you snuck one in sans silverware, right here on the stairs. You must be a very hungry boy."

"Oh, haha, yeah," Will babbled, torn to shreds everytime the older man called him 'boy.' "Guess so. They're roast chicken flavor, though, and that's the best one. Much better than the plain chicken flavor. Then of course there's the creamy chicken and chicken mushroom..."

Surely. There was some other topic of conversation aside from ramen noodles, a way for Will to escape the silly tangent he'd fallen into like a rabbit hole.

Hannibal had listened attentively, completely focused on Will, hands folded neatly in front of him. "I see."

He stared at Will as the tutor licked his lips. It almost seemed like he would be content to listen to anything Will wanted to go on about, anything at all. Just to look at him and hear his voice.

Will's imagination was running away with him again.

"The pajamas suit you well," Hannibal complimented, and Will only then glanced down to remember with increased "oh, no!" energy, he was wearing a pair of snug-fitting, black long underwear, clingy apparel that left little to the imagination, including the slight hard-on he sported which threatened to grow and become inappropriately apparent. He obviously hadn't expected to run into anyone else so late at night and his growling belly had him making a careless path to the kitchen.

God I wish you would peel these pajamas off me with your teeth. Instead of saying this, Will lowered the ramen bowl to in front of his groin, shielding the evidence of his arousal as best

he could.

“Um, thank you…”

How could he help getting all worked up when Hannibal was this close, listening so intently and smiling, as if there was nobody he would rather run into unexpectedly? As if Will had provided a light in the darkness of his restless ennui. He wanted that, too, so badly. He would move heaven and earth to get Hannibal relaxed, smiling and laughing, if he could.

Without doubt, Will Graham was King Hannibal’s *most faithful subject,* and if he ever did get the chance to show it, he fully planned to be excessive in his affection. Ahem.

Hannibal’s clever eyes had followed the relocation of the bowl with great interest. Will recalled that the long underwear set had been casually included among the rest of his newly commissioned wardrobe from the King.

This was something he really should store away for later thoughts, when he was alone in bed.

But his rationality had lessoned along with the flow of blood to his brain as it all coursed downward and tingles of attraction flooded his whole body. He bit his lip, savoring the silence between them and the intensity of their locked gazes.

After a few more moments spent like this, mutually entranced, he asked helplessly, “Do you gift whole new wardrobes to every new staff member who arrives at the castle? With, uh, pj’s like this?”

A coy look from the regal man before him was his reward for the daring question. “I think you know that I don’t.”

Will let that sink in for a few more long moments, his fingers tightening on the bowl because there was nothing else to hold onto.

“Oh.” He watched Hannibal watching him, feeling himself the subject of a sketch being stored up in the king’s memory. “What?” he giggled, finally breaking the tension because Hannibal was so serious and looking so intently now.

“Cerulean,” Hannibal murmured. “Your eyes – it’s the reflection of the moonlight off the snow, shimmering in through the window and touching your skin.” He swallowed. “Your eyes were a darker blue-grey a few minutes ago, in the shadows.”

“You have nice eyes too. They’re cinnamon…caramel…amber. It sounds like the most delicious dessert. Looking into them feels like that, too,” Will elaborated. “I mean. Not that I want to…eat your eyes? God, that came out wrong. I’m just trying to say…”

Hannibal dissolved into a sweet, whole-hearted laugh, not at his expense but full of fondness. Out of nowhere, he enveloped Will in his arms, the warm hug brief, the bowl suddenly Will’s least favorite object that had ever existed because it kept them further apart.

“Forgive me, that was impulsive,” Hannibal said, turning pink and flustered, “I don’t know why I…you seem to have a certain effect on my mood.”

“Well, I don’t mind,” Will assured him, the Southern drawl from his youth coming into his tone as it did when he was especially excited and nervous.

“That's a relief,” the King sighed, still perplexed. “Perhaps I need to get reacquainted with my instincts. It has been quite a while since I’ve met anyone I liked, much less made a new friend.”

“Are we friends?” Will raised his eyebrows. “Cause…I work for you…and you’re King, I’m commoner, all that. Is it allowed?”

“Hmmm. Not really.” Hannibal was gazing again, a mysterious smile on his face.

He put a hand on Will’s face and stroked his thumb over the younger man’s jawline. “You should have another set of those pajamas in blue.”

Stealing one more gaze that made Will’s knees week, he let his hand just barely caress the tutor’s ear, then stepped back politely. “And you shall. Goodnight, Will. Enjoy the snack.”

He went downstairs quickly, then disappeared into his office of all places. Did Hannibal *work* when he couldn’t sleep at night? That was just terrible. He should be back on the stairs, kissing Will, throwing the bowl to smash on the floor, learning Will’s body by heart with his commanding hands all over him –

“Enjoy the snack?” Will repeated in a small voice, baffled. “*Come baaack*.”

He almost wanted to stomp his foot and pout, feeling well and truly teased. But was the tease Hannibal’s own shyness, or a desire to prolong the flirtation and keep Will guessing, tightening the tension until it snapped? Both of these ideas, whether they might exist separate or blended in Hannibal’s intentions, turned Will on desperately.

Yet the closed door of the office spoke volumes. He returned to his lovely room and set the bowl down, forgetting all about his snack.

Instead, he went to the full-length mirror on the bedroom wall and looked at himself, his hands quickly moving to touch, first through the thin textured but warming fabric of the pajamas. They were the most comfortable ones he had ever owned, and they had been specially chosen for him by his *king. His* Hannibal.

“*God,*” Will moaned under his breath, blown away by the thoughts of having Hannibal as his very own, of being that special to the king, the only one he wanted to spend his nights with – long, passionate nights.

The fantasy blossomed as he imagined Hannibal touching him everywhere he touched himself. He smoothed a hand down his neck and thought about that lovely, royal mouth licking him and biting; he slipped his thumb into his mouth and yanked his shirt up abruptly to play with his nipples one at a time, slowly but with deliberate firmness, a roughness to the touch that was just what he liked. He pretended that Hannibal *commanded* him to stay right there and stare at his every naughty move in the mirror.

“Look how beautiful you are,” his imaginary king muttered darkly in his ear, overcome with erotic longing. “My good boy. Take out your cock and stroke it for me nice and slow.”

Will fell headfirst into the fantasy and eventually came, kneeling on the floor and watching the raunchy stroking getting faster. In the mirror, the act looked even dirtier, looking as if through Hannibal’s eyes, longing to have the king’s big hand wrapped around his aching, throbbing cock.

He fucked his hand even faster and had to use his other to clamp over his mouth, muffling his moan at the overstimulation and painful pleasure that made him tremble and bite his fingers.

This was getting intense. Will shivered, putting himself somewhat back together while sadly wishing he had a warm, strong lover to pick him up and carry him to bed for a cozy tucking in, lots of soothing kisses and cuddles. After he jerked off, he always felt lonelier. Almost wished he’d resisted the urge.

He had satisfied his horniness but only increased his yearning for tenderness, companionship, to be *romanced.* It all went together for him, and he didn’t want a relationship that only had one of those qualities. Without someone he loved to hold him, it was hard to settle down after coming that hard and this, in turn, made the experience seem shallow.

He’d been born in the wrong time, maybe. All his romantic ideals were so old-fashioned. Could that be why he was so attracted to the most old fashioned and polite, lofty but vulnerable man he’d ever met? It did make sense.

All he wanted was sleep but instead he tossed and turned, little imagining that King Hannibal was doing the same once returned to his huge bed in his magnificent royal chambers. That Hannibal, too, touched himself and thought of Will, then felt something was missing once he orgasmed, that this fantasy just wasn’t enough.

Will played their every encounter back in his memory for about the zillionth time, as counting the number of smiles he’d charmed from the King was his new way of getting to sleep, much nicer than counting sheep. It finally gave him a hint of comfort, so he snuggled into the luxurious silk sheets and the cool, relaxing pillow and drifted off to more dreams of ballroom dances, a crown placed on his curly head and a strong hand wrapped around his for life.

Chapter End Notes

The horseback riding part ended up in the next chapter -- which is fully drafted! I'll have it posted soon. 🥰

To be the one you're coming home to

Chapter Notes

> This chapter is insanely long! However, the only place it would really have made sense to split it was at a point of uncertainty that I know nobody would thank me for leaving off on.
>
> cw: rough sex and a ton of dirty talk; honestly why is it always the softest, cutest versions of these two that end up being the dirtiest in the sack? I ask you 😂
>
> Oh, and for the snowy horse riding scene, I imagined Fiona Apple's version of "Across the Universe" embodying the mood.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Pools of sorrow, waves of joy are drifting through my opened mind, Possessing and caressing me…" -The Beatles

***

The next two encounters between au pair and king were rockier. Will made another mistake, letting Abigail trick him into a privilege she wasn't allowed to have, sledding on the hills behind the castle. They were laughing and frolicking when Hannibal came walking along with his advisors, stopping in surprise to see teacher and student playing thus.

"Abigail," Hannibal called, displeased, "What in heaven's name are you doing?"

He looked so far away from Will like this, bundled up in his regal winter outerwear and flanked by Frederick Chilton, plus another three dour looking associates, but also tired. It gave the younger man the impression Hannibal had been inundated by demanding pressures during the whole time he'd been walking with the advising staff.

"Oops," she said, cringing at the way her father glowered and Will looked confused. "Sorry, Father, I…uh…forgot…"

"You *forgot* that you lost sledding privileges for the foreseeable future due to the incident with Princess Ingrid. How convenient. And I suppose you forgot, Mr. Graham, to ask Abel before trying any new activity with my daughter, since not all of them are permitted at a given time."

Hannibal frowned. "Perhaps you and Abigail have too much in common to be suitable companions as teacher and student."

Will was *steaming* by now, cheeks bright rosy red in the freezing snow which a few seconds ago had been so much fun to roll around in with his young charge. He was worse than offended by Hannibal calling him out like a fool in front of the advisors; he was hurt. He regretted his dumb dreams about the two of them together, or of someday being a family with him and Abigail. It was obviously nothing but a whim, the occasional flirtation the King bestowed on him. Will hated to feel used, worse to feel tricked, baited and switched.

He made as quick a path downhill towards the grumpy group on the garden grounds, the blue lightning of anger in his eyes causing Hannibal's eyes to narrow in reciprocated frustration.

"True, your majesty," Frederick Chilton was remarking, snide and pleased to see them in a falling out, "It's too hard to be a suitable au pair when you're so childish that you only want to be a friend to the child, overly indulgent, disorganized and –"

"Perhaps," Will snapped, ignoring Chilton and confronting Hannibal directly, scandalizing the formally dressed advisors with their stiff shoulders, like little paper doll soldiers of Rules and Regulations, Honor and Dignity.

"If you spent more time with your own daughter, especially at Christmas, she wouldn't be so lonely. I just want her to be happy, so sue me, fire me, whatever." Will shrugged. "It seemed like a harmless and healthy way for her to get some exercise. God forbid she enjoy the holidays when it's so much easier to punish her for every tiny infraction–"

Hannibal's jaw dropped, eyes flaring in offense. "Abigail put bubblegum in Princess Ingrid's hair when the Norwegian royal family came to visit us last month. The poor child had to have her hair cropped short to get all of it out, and the king and queen were infuriated with all of us, rightfully so. I have good reasons for–"

"Maybe you're a lot better as a King than a dad, Hannibal." Will's bold words caused the advisors to pompously object.

"I say, young man!" an old mustachioed fellow burst in, while Chilton's sly smile suggested that he actually relished Will's inappropriate aggression towards the King, which would certainly lead to his dismissal if it kept happening. "Entirely shocking!" said another advisor, a pinch-faced lady with the voice of an especially unpleasant third grade teacher about to tell Will he had to sit with his head on the desk and miss recess.

Hannibal had been shocked to silence. He stared at Will, and Will wasn't done yet, either.

"I can tell you this, you really suck at being a good friend." He stormed off, leaving them all behind. "I'm taking the rest of the day off," he scowled.

"So…does that mean I can go on sledding?" Abigail asked with a mischievous, barely regretful, questioning look at her father.

***

Hannibal was wretched all the rest of the afternoon and evening. What had he been thinking, losing his temper at Will in front of Frederick and the other advisors, embarrassing Will when

he'd done nothing wrong, only exposing himself to be as bad an employer as he apparently was a friend or a father.

Or a King.

Frederick had spent nearly the whole walk earlier in lecturing him on how he had allowed his "sensitivity" on certain necessary obligations of public accessibility to let the Lithuanian people's trust level in their ruler drop perilously from its previous place of security during his father's rule.

"You don't give enough of yourself to the people," Frederick had fussed, *"And you come off as very cold, uncaring, shut down…you need to go out among them and ingratiate yourself, your highness, and for goodness sake – confirm an engagement to a fellow noble person before you fall so low in approval ratings that a deposing becomes too real a possibility."*

And he'd been so hurt by the humiliating notion, no actually the frightening notion of his own people disliking him, wishing they had a better ruler like his father had been, that Hannibal had allowed the first petty irritation he encountered after the advisors' warnings to make him behave like an intolerable, unforgivable tyrant.

If only he could conceive of how to make it up to Will. How even to explain his feelings, which had him tied up in too many knots to untie, when every rope binding his deeper, more passionate feelings and his domestic, family man instincts was made of self-loathing? It should be his late wife who ruled the country and cared for Abigail, who provided kind and proper employment for her staff and gave the Lithuanian people everything they needed in terms of generosity of presence and spirit. He was…Hannibal didn't want to think about himself anymore.

He had patched matters up with Abigail, which was more important. After apologizing to his daughter for being too strict and unreachable of late, he'd stayed to watch her sledding, even taken a turn himself, and although she giggled in delight at his uncharacteristic show of fun, he felt hollow in the exercise, knowing despite doing better as a father, he had hurt Will. Badly.

Hannibal and Abigail had dismissed the kitchen staff and made dinner together: stuffed, breaded tomatoes and soft boiled eggs with potatoes, all the favorite comfort foods they used to make together before his wife's death had made him turn distant in his overwhelming grief. Once he had emerged from the denial and panic of the first few phases, he had lost his confidence, in his parenting abilities as well as everything else.

It had been so lovely to spend the time laughing and cooking with Abigail, then sharing the food in an impromptu indoor picnic near the fireplace in one of the palace's many lounging rooms. They had made plans to do this again soon and for Hannibal to take Abigail to an exhibit of Christmas decorations from all around the world which was being shown in the nearby capital. After telling jokes and stories, they sang a few songs together, until Abigail was fast asleep on the rug, right in the middle of a verse.

Hannibal kissed her sleepy little face and gathered her small form in his arms, carrying her to the nursery, slipping her under the lavender blankets in her bed.

He sat by her side, staring at her and wondering how he had strayed so far from his former self as to neglect anything she might need, any way he could show his affection and give her security. After all, the incident with Princess Ingrid had been serious, but the punishment had gone on too long; she was so young still that she could not be held to an adult standard of behavior, especially while grieving. Her pale, innocent, freckled face looked so adorable, especially when she crinkled her aristocratic nose in her sleep and yawned a plea for her best bear, a fluffy pastel green stuffed toy who had seen better days.

Her parents had selected the bear for baby Abigail before she was born, and had been delighted when the baby took to the soft lovey, even still dragging it around the palace as a crawling and cruising toddler. Always, Cabbage the bear clutched in her little fist or dangling from her distracted fingers.

It was well her mother's family would be with them soon for Christmas, including Lina's sister Mathilde and her own three children, triplets only a year older than Abigail. She needed the warmth of a fuller family life and the companionship of other children. He must find more ways to let Abigail be social without the dangers of the royals-obsessed paparazzos he didn't want anywhere near her. Was he too protective?

Abigail's elaborate unicorn lamp scattered the darkened ceiling with bright, tiny white stars, and the sounds of her slow, even breathing reassured him. Sometimes, he still feared he'd lose her somehow, some way he would never be able to predict, and he knew he couldn't survive another loss of someone he loved. He kissed her forehead and whispered good night.

***

Now then, Hannibal reasoned, deciding in his room later on that it was time to stop sulking over his mistakes and do something *about* them.

It had been a while since he'd been in this situation, since he normally prided himself on being so entirely polite that he could not quite recall when he had managed to offend someone dear to him.

So very dear.

He was haunted by the memory of Will's lovely face so angry, even more beautiful for the flushed cheeks and flashing blue eyes. Immediately Will's hurt feelings and resentment had made Hannibal realize what a fool he was. Yet he hadn't said so, instead he had clammed up! Why had he stood there in stark silence after he had used his voice so efficiently to ill effect? How to communicate his regret in a *big* enough way that Will would understand?

Ah! He decided, smiling to himself, sitting at his desk in his usual robe and slippers, glasses on and a fountain pen in hand. Perfect. He would show Will how high his regard was and how much he valued the teacher, wanted him to stay, perhaps even…another hint of getting closer? He had feared the wardrobe made his "Crush" a tad too obvious, but he couldn't regret it after seeing how delighted and flattered Will had been with his gifts, before Hannibal completely ruined everything.

He wanted to see that look on Will's face again, that bright and honest smile, even, selfishly, he wanted the feeling of heightened tension that came from mutual attraction and wanting. He didn't want to miss a chance to capture the heart of such a stunning, remarkable boy – love might never call on him again if he erred now. What were the chances he would meet a possible soulmate under such random circumstances? It had to be fate!

After thoughtfully composing a page-long list in his most floridly scrolling cursive, Hannibal called for Abel and handed his butler the shopping orders with great enthusiasm.

"All of this is to be purchased post haste and delivered to Mr. Will Graham's room," Abel read from the note at the bottom of the list, looking rather bewildered, borderline judgmental in fact, which he rarely ever was. "Your highness, are you quite sure…?"

"Quite. I am the King, after all. I have completed many a successful negotiation in the realm of diplomacy. Surely I should know best how to resolve an argument." Hannibal's proud smile made Abel's frown deepen.

"Well. You see, from what I have heard, the words exchanged between you and Will this afternoon were not so much 'an argument' as…" Abel hesitated. "May I speak with entire frankness, your majesty?"

"Please do." Hannibal took his glasses off and laid them on the desk, thinking to use them again once Abel left so he could sketch…looking forward to the chance to express some of his emotions on the pages of his already stuffed journal.

He walked to the ruby colored couch in his personal sitting room and sank into it with an expectant look, gesturing for Abel to make himself comfortable.

"Thank you, sir." Abel sat in the chair across from the king and said flatly, "Your majesty, it sounded like it was less of an 'argument,' more a case of you making an ass of yourself by publicly scolding Will, who had done nothing wrong."

"Did that many people overhear our conversation?" Hannibal asked breathlessly, not so much wounded by Abel calling him an 'ass' as by the notion that everyone knew exactly how much of a royal horse's ass he had been.

It seemed to amplify his bad behavior and make it worse. He didn't want his staff, who always loved and respected him, to fear he'd become a grumpy and unpleasant master.

"No, of course not, but you see, er…young Mr. Graham has been quite liberal and descriptive in recounting the incident to most anyone who will listen. He is quite upset and…currently given to tirades which – thank heavens Frederick has not heard them, as he would try to arrest the poor lad for treasonous slander." Abel sighed as more color drained from Hannibal's face.

"Thank you for your honesty, Abel, I need to be alone now," the king said, as the words flowed from him in a long gush of panicked breath.

He was almost afraid to see Will again until the gifts were delivered and his own regret, his own affection were understood…hopefully accepted.

Too upset to sit at the stiff desk, he took his sketchbook to bed and tossed the covers down, feeling quite in a mood to slap himself in the head. What had he been about, venting his troubled mind about completely other matters of politics, reputation and pressures, on the one person he cared for more than all others save his daughter? The affection had struck him like a tidal wave, taking him over so quickly that he only realized the full depth of his feelings for Will now, when his place in the au pair's life seemed threatened.

Groaning in consternation, he tried and failed to relieve the burning in his cheeks and the nervousness in his belly, the anxiety wrapped too tight around his brain, by sketching – Will, of course, many times and never satisfactory in capturing his beauty. He drew Abigail asleep after their lovely evening together, drew the castle gardens covered in a blanket of snow, ended by throwing pencil and pad against the wall. Nothing helped. He could not feel better.

He needed Will.

***

The following morning, a renewed effort at improving his panicked disposition sent Hannibal to the castle's impressive spa facilities.

Perhaps a good long sit in the sauna would decrease his stress, clear his mind–

Hannibal's heart caught in his throat as his speedy stride towards the sauna room was interrupted by none other than Will Graham himself. In fact, they nearly collided straight on, and if it were not for the uncomfortable point in which their relationship had found itself, he certainly would have made a joke along the lines of "we must stop meeting like this," accompanied by a flirtatious smile.

As it was, they neither of them smiled, but both looked very serious indeed. Both of them were nearly nude, dressed only in a thick white towel wrapped around their waist.

Will's divine body wore a light sheen of sweat from the sauna, and his luscious curls were damp on his brow. He was…even more ravishing than in Hannibal's numerous and highly creative fantasies. Every detail of the boy was sculpted by the gods to exceed their own beauty.

Will's *face* wore a scowl much hotter than the steamy room, hot with pure rage that almost knocked the king right off his feet, combined with such immense gorgeousness.

The boy glared at Hannibal's hard, gleaming muscles, his powerful pectorals covered in softly dense greying hair, defined biceps, and the round belly that formed the king's one physical insecurity. Will took the time to pause, staring at each new part of Hannibal revealed by the chance encounter, his cheeks flaming redder with indignation.

"Will, please, allow me to–" that was as far as Hannibal managed to babble, staring so hard at Will that his eyes seemed liable to bulge from their sockets. His heart was pounding, he could

not seem to think of *words*!

"Thought I'd try the sauna out, unless that's somewhere on a list of privileges I need to ask *permission* to indulge." Will glowered.

Hannibal sighed, "Of course you're more than welcome to--"

“Excuse me,” Will snapped, storming past Hannibal as if he’d rather be anywhere else than in the king’s presence.

And Hannibal was alone again with his thoughts. This was terrible.

***

When the gifts arrived shortly before dinnertime, Will dismissed the servants with many thanks and closed the door with a calm expression.

Alone with the stack of gift bags and boxes, overflowing with pretty, glittery tissue paper and sparkling bows in the nicest Christmassy shades of bright green, red, silver and gold, Will stared them down.

He turned, walked to his bed, picked up his plump pillow, stuck his face in it, and screamed on the top of his lungs.

That done, he sat on the rug like a kid on Christmas morning to whom Santa had been uncommonly generous, and slowly unwrapped each item, never cracking a smile. Each present was more thoughtful and beautiful than the one before, and that’s why each one made him sadder and sadder. His heart was heavy in his chest. The sweet smell from the three huge bouquets of red roses overwhelmed his senses.

There were boxes of chocolates so fancy and in so many delectable varieties his stomach grumbled. “You’re not eating those,” he said irritably, pointing at his tummy.

“And *you’re* not melting now,” Will added, clapping a hand over his wounded heart. “Not after what he pulled and how he thinks sending me a bunch of expensive presents is gonna smooth it over. Please. We can do better, heart, you know it.”

He didn’t believe himself about the whole ‘not melting’ thing, but he was definitely, definitely, definitely…still mad.

More pairs of the infamous long underwear, one of them navy blue as Hannibal had promised; Will tossed them back in their box and clapped on the lid, smacking it angrily when it wouldn’t stay on.

He was currently wearing *his own* clothes which he’d brought with him: jeans and a faded t shirt that said *Caution! Wet Paint - on my hands, face, arms…and probably this shirt*.

After a hot, angry shower, he remained overheated in more ways than one, so he was barefoot, and when the room began to feel colder, he was highly tempted by the fluffy, perfect sleep socks in one of the boxes. He tossed them back in the box with a huff. Ditto for

the insanely nice art supplies and the teddy bear with a red bow around his neck who he would have liked to hug to his chest. Same for the soft cashmere sweaters, the casual-cool slim fit corduroy pants and a set of hairbrushes with pearl all over the back of them, then a large, golden comb that looked like something a mermaid used on her long, glamorous tresses. Did Hannibal have a thing about his hair?

"Doesn't matter."

There was cologne, obviously expensive and by some classy designer he'd never heard of, and it smelled sensational: Sensuous but fresh, woodsy, a hint of the blues.

He sulked, sighed and rejected every single wonderful gift. Still, he was grateful he'd looked, since otherwise he always would have wondered what was inside the ridiculously multitudinous packages. Now they would sit outside his door, crookedly stacked and with their bows lopsided, and he would be in his room all night. No way in hell he was going to dinner with the family the way he felt. It would be much more fun to cry himself to sleep, but maybe first he could throw darts at a picture of King Hannibal.

***

Hannibal had nearly given up hope for arranging an encounter with Will, but as evening fell, then deepened, the thought of throwing pebbles up at the au pair's window occurred to him as a possible last resort.

The news given him by Abel that the presents had been one and all rejected had hit him hard with remorse, as his butler's prediction had proved correct. Gift giving might be one of his main love languages, but King Hannibal was learning a hard lesson, that sometimes simple, sincere words were needed more than extravagant treats.

He was just partaking in a brisk walk around the snowy castle grounds, trailed distantly by his security guards, trying to work up the nerve to toss the pebbles at the correct window of the room where his Juliet presumably lay sleeping when he saw a light, heard quiet noise and movement from the stables.

Dropping the small collection of discrete pebbles from his sweaty palm – he brushed his hands off and walked swiftly to the stables with a foolish sprig of zest trying to blossom in his heart.

Don't hope it's him. That he's there. And that he'd want to see you. He'd look at you. He's the one. You're dreams are getting out of control. Don't…

And there Will was. He could already hear his sweet voice speaking with one of the horses. Hannibal could barely take it, knowing what a fool he had been. *Don't. Don't hope. Anything but that–*

Hannibal walked into the stables and before being detected he saw Will, with his pensive profile, art in motion.

The teacher was speaking in a kind, empathetic tone to a looming, elegant Friesian, a horse so stunning and rare that nobody save Hannibal ever talked to him like that, as if he was a horse like any other with simple needs and feelings.

For a few more moments Hannibal stood, awestruck by Will's very existence. The boy had to lean up and the horse lean down so their foreheads could touch, and Will's giggle made Hannibal's heart want to burst with adoration, longing to make him laugh in a hundred different ways. To even think that he might have made Will cry…

"You like apples, huh?" Will put out his hand, revealing a golden fruit which was promptly taken up in the horse's mouth and chomped down. "There you go. Now, then…are you going to let me sketch your portrait?"

The horse whinnied quietly, almost as if he understood Will's words and didn't care to be sketched.

The au pair chuckled, "Oh, don't be shy. You know you're lovely. Aw, c'mon. Why the long face?" Will stroked the horse's head, nodding in gradual agreement with his mood. "Uh huh, I think I know. I guess you've got a point. Too much attention can be exhausting, especially around here." He sighed.

"Do you always talk to horses?" Hannibal asked softly.

Will didn't look up, just continued stroking that lucky horse's head, a conflicted expression clouding his averted gaze.

"Not always. Find they're better company than some of my formerly favorite people these days."

Hannibal wanted to die. He couldn't stand this, that he'd ruined it. He made himself say, through a tornado of insecure self-loathing, "I'm sorry, Will."

Will, prideful and still very hurt, wearing his own winter coat which looked sadly insubstantial, and his heart on his sleeve, nodded again, even more sadly.

"Thought you'd misplaced those words somewhere between your manners and your pride."

"It was only…"

"What's his name?" Will asked instead, eyes locked with the stallion's jet black ones, obviously growing more nervous with the ongoing sensation of the King's eyes on him.

Hannibal withdrew his gaze, knowing he looked too long, and strode through the stables slowly, pausing to pet the other horses on his path to the stall where Will stood.

"He's my horse." Hannibal smiled that Will should choose this one to sketch of all the others. "Abigail named him…Pepsi."

Will laughed. His anger disappeared for a moment and he repeated incredulously, "*Pepsi*? He definitely looks like a Zeus or Royal Onyx or something."

“Abigail loves American soda.” Hannibal kept a polite distance, delicately assigning his gaze to a blonde Haflinger mare with sweet eyes. “We took a trip to New York two years ago and she’s been fond ever since, though she’s rarely allowed to have them.”

“All the wonders of New York, huh?” Will shook his head in disbelief. “It’s wild to me how you royals yearn for Pepsi and the like while we starving artists waste away in our tiny apartments dreaming about stunning, exotic European castles and horses so beautiful they don’t seem real.”

“Meanwhile, my favorite aspect of visiting America is my anonymity.” Hannibal shrugged. “To stand in a long line with everyone else, sans special treatment, or to be yelled at by a cab driver.”

“*That’s* what you long for?” Will’s eyes widened, meeting Hannibal’s again for a split second of heat before his attention ran away, fleeing to the sketchpad he lifted off a small table nearby.

“You’d be surprised what you want when you can’t have it.” Hannibal still kept his distance, but the warm, intimate suggestiveness of his words made it seem they were face to face, breathing each other’s oxygen, longing to consume it.

“Yeah. That’s true.” Will faced him reluctantly with the sketchbook now pressed protectively to his chest. “I guess I don’t really know what it’s like to want something and have it. Must be nice. I halfway think it’d terrify me. The novelty, you know…the risk. It hurts enough just to want.”

“It must be a great wound to travel so far from home on the wing and prayer of a new beginning, only to be treated cruelly by the first new friend you’ve made.”

“Why did you send me all those extravagant gifts yesterday?” Will asked. He chewed his lip, bitterness in his eyes.

Hannibal longed to bite that lip, then lavish his tongue over it and lick deep into Will’s mouth, but he only took two steps closer and answered huskily, “Didn’t you like them?”

His vulnerability seemed to stop Will’s misery in its tracks. As if the boy hadn’t expected his feelings to be returned with equal fervor, as though he did not comprehend how precious he had become to the King in such a short amount of time.

“Of course I liked them,” Will said frankly, “I loved them. They came from you. But it was the way you tried to buy me off –”

“Buy you off? No, never.” Hannibal shook his head emphatically, tears shining in his mahogany eyes. “Will, you’re not a commodity or a prize, nor a convenience.”

“Glad to hear you *say* that.” Will walked closer, and now they really were only a few potentially very quick moments away from chest to chest and where that would lead. “I didn’t want gifts, Hannibal.”

The raw intimacy of his plain first name sent lightening down Hannibal's spine, arousal warm in his low belly, tightening at his core, infatuated thrall making him dizzy.

"I just wanted you…" Will dared to take the king's hand tentatively, then gave it a brief, warm squeeze to emphasize his point. "I wanted you to come to me yourself, in person, *not because you happened to run into me by accident* and *say* you were sorry, tell me I meant something to you – that you'd never embarrass me like that again or treat me like a punching bag for your misplaced and immature temper. I think I'd forgive you almost anything if you just gave me that honesty, that *care.* You didn't even bother, like I wasn't worth the time or effort, but you could send your servants shopping to make up for it–"

"*No.* Will, that isn't what happened. I can only beg you to believe me when I tell you, I was scared out of my mind when I realized what I'd done. How I'd hurt you, and how I couldn't imagine why you'd forgive me or believe how much I care for you." His voice trembled with emotion, his hand shaking slightly in the yearning to touch Will, hold him, kiss his forehead and say it would all be okay.

Somehow, he just knew that was what they both needed from the other more than anything else.

"Thank you for saying it now."

"You won't ask me the reason for my fear?" Hannibal was getting reckless, and he wasn't surprised when Will drew back, gulping and staring at the straw-strewn wooden floor.

"I don't think so, not right now. I'd like to see you ride your horse instead."

Hannibal smiled in confused surprise. "You would?"

"Yes. It's a full moon, turns the snow into glitter, the palace grounds into an ethereal wonderland. I know you must be an excellent horseman, and…I suppose it's the artist in me wanting to see for myself, on such a beautiful night."

"You'll come with me, then?" Hannibal proposed excitedly, gesturing to the blonde mare. "I think she would treat you well. This is Nicki…Minaj."

Will laughed again, every whole-hearted ring of it making Hannibal weak in the knees. The au pair's smile was the most gorgeous sight he had ever seen, and he was addicted.

"You let Abigail name all the horses, huh?"

"I did. Mind you, she is only allowed to listen to the 'clean' versions of those songs. What do you say, my…I mean, ahem, Will? Please, allow me the honor of your company."

He cleared his throat again for lack of another idea what to do, feeling out of depths again, as if he had never had a crush, much less an impromptu quasi-date with one. As though he wasn't nearly fifty, but a blushing teenager with his heart in outstretched hands.

The younger man put the sketchbook back down on the table, thinking carefully. "Okay."

Confidently, Will opened the stall and prepared Nicki for the ride, adjusting the saddle and soothing her with friendly greetings.

“You’re an expert at this,” Hannibal observed as they led the horses outside, their hooves making soft crunching noises in the snow.

“I used to ride sometimes back home in Louisiana as a kid,” Will explained. “There was a horse farm down the road from one of the many trailer parks we lived in, my dad and me. I walked out there one day on a curious whim and the lady who owned the place offered me riding lessons. I loved it. Haven’t been on a horse in years, but I’ve missed it.”

He let Hannibal hover close by to assist him in climbing astride the mare, although they both knew it was completely unnecessary.

As they set off for a wandering ride around the immense estate, the snow indeed looked like real Christmas magic, the kind Hannibal used to think no longer existed outside of dreams. He led the way up a tall hill which would give them a remarkable view of the castle from a distance, and it felt like ascending to heaven, the stars within reach, Will’s presence and the hope of his forgiveness enough to make him elated.

The night held them in suspension amidst the universe with its glittering diamond stars and full, shining moon.

There were no problems, no pressing foreign diplomacy, budgetary nightmares, new laws or pushy advisors, no expectations. Only Will’s smiles and their pleasant conversation, their breath visibly puffing in the cold air, glances intrigued and frequent.

They talked about anything that came to mind, from art to music, Christmas traditions to New Years’ Resolutions. Will wanted to believe in himself and take more chances; Hannibal wanted much the same. When they reached the place where Hannibal told Will the very best vantage point could be had, they stopped to look.

“It’s beautiful,” Will breathed, gazing with amazement at the castle from above.

Hannibal only looked at Will now as he replied huskily, “It certainly is.”

Will quickly turned to see if he’d correctly felt that Hannibal spoke of him and not the view, but just as quickly Hannibal looked away, blushing and staring at the castle. He felt Will smiling at him.

“I have something to say to you,” the king announced with tender solicitude as the horses held steady in place on top of the hill.

The whole palace grounds were spread out below them under a peaceful blanket of snow, the tall towers and countless-seeming windows looking like a whimsical fairy tale place. It felt oddly but beautifully as if they were inside a snow globe, outside reality. Alone together, at long last.

Hannibal was all too glad that his security guards gave him ample, respectful space before following on to check on his safety. He *only* wanted to be with Will, no one else's eyes on them.

"Hmm?" Will had been so utterly bewitched by the view, he'd gone into a slight daze. A drifting mist of fresh snow fell from the dark sky and into his luscious curls, and his beautiful hands in those old, battered gloves rested comfortably on the front of the saddle. His posture straightened, registering the seriousness in Hannibal's tone.

His own eyes were a darker blue than Hannibal had seen them before, shining in navy, his pretty lips forming a hesitant smile. He gave the older man his full attention, seeming surprised by his own power to intimidate the king just that easily.

"I think I've realized why I lashed out at you yesterday. While it was unforgivable, I believe it came from an entirely different place. In the time since my father and wife passed, I've been suffering in quiet agonies of stress, increasingly concerned at my inferiority both as a king and a father, desperately lonely and with no one I was at liberty to confide in. The feelings simply never had any place to go, so they have burned inside me, consuming more of my confidence and happiness every day.

But with you, it's so different…you see through the title and even my admittedly obnoxious ego…"

Will chortled, "Yeah, I do." His lovely features showed so much empathy and affection at hearing of Hannibal's ordeal, it made it alright for him to go on voicing the pains he had so long repressed.

"I think I haven't felt safe in years, that I lost my moorings when I lost them. It had been hard enough recovering from my sister's death as a young child. This was…compounded pressure on an old, terrible wound. I was suffocated in grief, then felt incapable of being who my position demands I be. All the work I put into my stiff upper lip, my concentration on every royal duty, it came from such hard work. And it was all false. You make me feel safe, Will."

Will stared at him, astonished as tears trickled down his handsome moonlit face. "*Hannibal.*"

"I felt safe with you, so I must have known on a subconscious level, if I let some of those bad feelings out with you, you wouldn't hate me or leave me. It just…came out in the worst way at a wrong moment, with the feelings translated into this strange, misdirected scolding…I still can't fathom where the words came from. Only that I'd been wretched with self-doubt verging on complete despair all day, and that my advisors were dragging me further into depression with their high handed advice and obvious suggestions that I would never be the king my father was, but I had better damn well try to pretend I could be. And there you were all of a sudden, and I…"

"Okay," Will smiled, murmuring a well-heeded command for the horse to stay where she was as he climbed off and put his arms out. "Okay. Come here."

Hannibal slipped from his own steed quickly and walked into Will's arms, wrapping the boy up in a tight embrace while they both let out breaths of relief at the long-awaited contact. It

was a passionate hug, not like the too-brief and chaste one he'd given Will that night on the stairs. This was the way he'd wanted to hug Will, possessively, full of emotion, his tears falling into Will's soft curls while he buried his nose there and held on. Will held on just as tightly and murmured, "It's okay. I'm here."

"Thank you for being here." Hannibal's entire heart went to Will with the words, and he knew he would never want it back.

Hannibal lingered a few moments more, until concern made his deluge of personal stress, his desire and besotted desperation take second place in his impressions and priorities. Will was lovely and firm in his arms, but he felt cold to the touch.

"Please let me take care of you. Let me make you warm. You shouldn't come out in such weather in those things." He pulled back enough to examine the shoddy coat and gloves that had a few small holes in them. "Oh, Will." He lifted the chilled hands to his lips and sighed, "*Will.*"

Will's breath caught in his throat. He stared at Hannibal with unmistakable yearning, the tension between them so palpable it ought to melt the night into summer.

Then Hannibal saw, from the corner of his eye, that his security guards had gotten closer eventually, now arriving at the bottom of the hill, too close for him to continue.

"I need to be all alone with you." He let Will's hands go but leaned in to murmur in his ear, "I want to kiss you."

Will moaned, the sound unbearably sexy, so soft with longing. "Please." His beautiful body trembled, not from the cold.

"We're not alone, my dear." The rumbled sentiment, deeper and more personal than he'd allowed himself to date, excited them both. "Go to my room and wait for me. I'll come to you."

"Your…room?" Will repeated, "Are you sure?"

Hannibal growled this time, quietly commanding. "My room, Will. Do as you are told."

Will moaned again, his face so close to nuzzling into Hannibal's warmth. "God. Okay. I'll be there."

Their closeness was already quite enough to show the guards that the two of them were at least attracted, if not involved. Hannibal would not let them be privy to anything further. And he had so much in the way of further affection to bestow.

He waited until Will rode down the hill and back across the snowlit path they had taken, following in the horseprints to the stables. Then he rode down as well, but waited until Will had returned Nicki to her stall. Watched while the au pair walked quietly to the front entrance of the castle and went inside, quite alone, his sketchbook dangling from his hand.

Then he made a show of riding around the castle in an elegantly precise circle. He yawned upon his own return to the stables and walked Pepsi back inside casually, bidding him a fond goodnight.

He nodded and waved a polite goodnight to the two guards, who were nice fellows but not personal friends, distant protectors only. A little too committed to shadowing him all the time, except when he went into his royal chambers at night. Then he had all the privacy he could want. And he wanted.

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There was no hesitation, no moment of mutual bashfulness at the implication of the scene when Hannibal came into his room and closed the door behind him, locking it with a low clunking sound.

Will stood obediently right in the center of the lavish bedroom, his snow boots having been politely left beside the door, inside so the servants wouldn't see them in the hall. In his jeans, t-shirt and flannel and socked feet, he blushed and met Hannibal's fiery look head on.

Hannibal went to him as a man dying of thirst would fling himself into a river and drink it down in passionate desperation. He pressed his body tightly to Will's again, this time leaning down to brush a first kiss to plush lips. The contact was soft and careful, but aching with need.

Their arms had gone around each other instinctively, and he had one hand clamped to Will's low back under the flannel, one cupping the back of his neck. Will's arms were flung haphazardly around Hannibal's neck, and his angelic eyes seared into Hannibal as he breathed heavily in the wake of the kiss.

"How was that? I wanted to kiss you…but I didn't invite you here to pressure you for anything more…" His words faltered; he was overwhelmed by the soft openness and raw lustful desire trembling on Will's skin, reverberating through the boy's whole being. Will's whole being seemed to express only one word, *please.*

He lost the thread of what he had intended as a very sensitive and necessary speech, and which he actually did mean from the bottom of his heart. His protectiveness about Will could even extend to himself. The last thing he would want was a seduction that came from any circumstance but entire reciprocation, from Will also saying it was right, feeling just as safe as he made Hannibal feel.

To do otherwise would be a crime, but Will clung onto his shirt collar and the back of his hair, fingers digging in greedily with needy sighs and rough tugs. "You don't have to stop," Will begged, "Please don't stop. Kiss me. Touch me–"

That was all Hannibal could take before he was gathering Will up even more firmly in his arms, lifting the hem of his t-shirt to stroke his open hand down the exposed skin of his back, pawing at the younger man feverishly. He tipped Will back slightly so the boy knew to lift his chin and show his neck more fully, and then he buried his face in that pale, soft, vulnerable

skin, kissing, licking and biting, sucking as his hand went roughly into Will's hair and grabbed a handful to pull.

How could he live another second without feeling and worshipping every single inch of this boy, so supple and perfect in his arms, so entirely needy and obedient to his demands?

Will moaned almost frantically at the passionate, hot kisses leaving his neck wet and aching in bite marks that would soon be bruises, and when Hannibal sucked at one of the bites, drawing out more pain and marking his claim, he cried out, "*Fuck,* yes, please, please," ready when the king's hungry kiss returned to his lips and claimed more, deeper, still playing with and pulling Will's hair while his tongue plundered sweet lips and slid against an innocent but so naughty return of wet, sliding tongue. His big hands smoothed down Will's back to clutch his perfect little ass, the feeling of it under the denim making him groan into the next kiss.

The room and the night were so entirely silent except for their noises of wanton arousal, so they tried to be quiet, panting and gasping with every hotter, messier kiss, Will's fingers flying to Hannibal's shirt buttons and undoing them deftly. His hips bucked forward and he whined when Hannibal spanked him for his boldness. Will put his face in Hannibal's neck and cried out with soft abandon, kissing and licking, nibbling, "Oh, Daddy, please."

He blushed redder a second later, realizing the word he'd let slip in the heat of passion. Hannibal watched him with dark seductive intrigue while the boy shuffled his feet a little and bit his already swollen lip.

"I'm sorry, that's kinky and we haven't discussed it. It's been on my mind, ummmmm a lot." Will put his pretty hands with those long, artistic fingers on the open front of Hannibal's shirt and caressed, so gently and shyly, the swath of hairy chest he had unveiled. He sucked in a breath.

"Has it?" He played with Will, applying a slightly stern and questioning look that made Will quiver even more.

"Yes, but I'm sorry, uhhh…your Royal Daddiness," Will blurted, turning nearly purple with mortification. "Ooops, I mean–"

"You're my favorite," Hannibal said simply, cupping that blushing face in both his larger hands and kissing those rosebud lips for all he was worth. Countless fortunes he would throw away just to have one kiss from Will.

"Your favorite…what?" Will asked, lips shining and puffy. His gorgeous eyes, his perfection, his everything dug into Hannibal like claws.

"You'll see," he answered in a husky, teasing tone, a serious look on his face right before he put a dominating hand in Will's hair again and used it to shove the boy down to his knees before him.

As he had expected from his reactions so far, Will moaned with joy at being manhandled and ordered wordlessly to serve the king in this way. He looked up at Hannibal with big, beautiful

blue eyes and thoroughly ruffled and mussed curls, pink cheeks against alabaster skin. An angel.

“Your royal highness, for quite some time I’ve hoped I might show you the extent of my devotion.” Will unbuttoned Hannibal’s trousers and slowly slid the zipper down, licking his lips. Teasing and worshipful lust were mixed in his tone as he added, palming the front of Hannibal’s briefs and feeling the big cock hardened beneath, “Would you be so kind as to allow me to pay you this service, as your loyal subject and most admiring devotee?”

The naughty boy knew precisely how to drive the king right out of his mind. Hannibal growled fiercely, overcome with the sensations of intense arousal radiating through his body with every place Will touched him, as the boy slyly began to slide his underwear down, gasping when the king’s thick cock was released to his eager gaze. Hannibal was rock hard and dripping precum, and had been in this state since the moment he felt Will’s tongue against his own. He wanted to kiss Will’s mouth forever, and at the same time he’d obsessively wanted the younger man’s mouth somewhere else, putting those same skills to good use.

“Oh, *your majesty,*” Will sighed admiringly, his mouth watering.

He wrapped his hand around the king’s hot, throbbing manhood and gave an experimental stroke, making them both groan in immediate pleasure. “You’re so *big*. Just like I thought.”

“Go on, *take it*, that’s an order.” When this decree sent a shudder of arousal through Will, Hannibal repeated sternly, though quivering and sweating with need, “Suck me off like a good boy, Will. Show me your devotion. Make me believe it.”

Will rubbed his thumb over the tip, gathering precum which he used to lubricate his next few strokes, staring up into the king’s eyes as he slowly moved his face closer, then licked a broad stripe over the engorged flesh.

“Oh!” Hannibal gasped, delirious with every luscious curl and flick of Will’s wet, warm tongue, and his excitement made Will more deliberate, sucking each of his balls and licking them while the king threw his head back and closed his eyes, muttering Lithuanian profanities.

Then Will began sucking his cock in earnest, moaning in delight with every deeper shove of Hannibal’s thick length he could get into his slickly enveloping mouth, his tight pretty lips, his naughty and playful tongue.

Hannibal almost disintegrated. He had to groan weakly, “Please, stop for a moment, Will.” He pulled out of Will and squeezed a hand around his desperate cock to stop the impending orgasm. “I – want to come into your pretty little ass.” His eyes bored into Will’s. “I’ve wanted it all along.”

“Me too,” Will shivered, responding with small, cute mewls when Hannibal traced his lips with his thumb, the touch rough and loving.

Relieved he had talked his body down from coming this soon, he couldn't resist taking just a little more of the endless euphoria he might find plunging into Will's scrumptiously mischievous mouth.

"Naughty boy," he said hoarsely, planting a hand on Will's chest and backing him towards the bed. Once there, he grabbed the boy's slender waist and tossed him onto the huge king-sized bed, where Will bounced a few times, gasping and reaching, already, to touch his lover again.

Hannibal undressed him, snarling more wanton dirty talk and marking him all over with the brand of his unstoppable tongue and teeth. He lapped slowly at Will's rosy, hard nipples, keeping hard eye contact and living for every breathy, high pitched moan he evoked with that irresistible, tight, angelic little body under his control.

"Do whatever you want with me," Will pleaded.

Hannibal hovered over him, earth-shaking lust etched on his chiseled face, no trace of reserve or elegance, though he remained godlike in his natural ferocity, a kind of brutal gracefulness.

"*Call me Daddy again*," he rasped against Will's lips.

"Daddy," Will sighed, still trying to pull his naked body closer and tighter on top of his own, hairy chest pressing into his bare one, Hannibal's heavy erection brushing against Will's own eager cock, then poking into his belly or thighs with every wild kiss they kept sharing. "Daddy, please fuck me, I need you so much."

The lust was deep in his voice and painted across his stunning face, but even more profoundly, his sincerity when he added, "You're all I think about," voice shaking as hard as his thighs the lower Hannibal's knowing, firm hand wandered.

"Oh, baby," Hannibal answered with a rugged sigh, massaging his open hand all the way down Will's torso, feeling every perfect smoothness of skin, hard line of muscle and softer curve to his heart's content, "You can't possibly think I'll let you leave this bed until you're so used and throttled with pleasure you might even black out."

"Jesus, yes, yes," Will whimpered, covering his mouth and biting his fingers as Hannibal went down on him, making his hips move up and down like ocean waves commanded by his every ministration, his mouth coming down on Will's dripping cock, unstoppable, sucking fast and taking every inch, lying between Will's thighs knowing there was nowhere he'd ever want to be more.

He smiled a very dirty smile and snatched one of the many soft throw pillows to slide under Will's ass, enjoying and soothing the boy's increasing trembles.

"Daddy." Will's hand tightened on the king's head, his other one clutching at the sheets, but there was nothing to hold onto that would make the pleasure more bearable.

Hannibal ate him out so slowly and built the tempo up with gradual perfection, until finally Will was soaking wet with the king's saliva, crying out into his hand which had by now flown back over his lips. The older man moaned in his own delight at Will's beauty and the taste of

his private places, how his tight entrance began to relax until he could ease the tip of his tongue inside.

Will whispered intensely, "*Daddy,* that's so good–" immediately slapping his hand back on his mouth. His legs were over the king's broad shoulders, quivering convulsively while his majesty fucked his hole, relentless as his tongue licked, then pushed in with a rhythm that made the world start to blur into ecstasy.

"Yes?" Hannibal smirked with that same animal darkness in his eyes, wet-lipped as he stared into Will's sweet gaze. "Perhaps you'd like Daddy's fingers in you now?"

"Uh huh, yes, please–"

Soon, and after a generous drizzle of lube, Hannibal had worked one of his big fingers carefully into the heavenly body beneath him, all the while kissing Will, accepting every needy little sigh, gasp and kiss he received in return, the begging and moaning starting to make him come undone.

"You're perfect," he told Will hoarsely, "*Perfect.* Do you want me to fuck your mouth again before that gorgeous little hole of yours?"

"Mmm, God, please, Daddy, yes, I want you to use me for everything you want. Let me make you feel so good, all your troubles melt away."

With that, Will opened his lips invitingly, and held onto the king's thighs as he began thrusting with solid, gliding strokes into Will. He held Will by his hair and chin, setting the tempo to whatever he liked, giving brief breaks in between his deeper fucking that made the boy choke ecstatically. He found himself unravelling, moving faster, grabbing and forcing Will harder to take more, and Will's fingers clutching at his thighs only begged for even more, more than was even physically possible for either. The mattress, strong and sturdy, nonetheless squeaked slightly with their wild motions.

He finally managed to pull out of Will's mouth, only out of unstoppable need to be as far and deep and tightly held inside him as he could ever get. After a few more aggressive thrusts from three of his fingers, twisting and slamming against Will's ass while the boy grabbed at the headboard and opened himself more, trembling thighs moving to accommodate *whatever Hannibal wanted with him,* the king was confident he had opened and relaxed the beautiful younger man enough for what came next.

They started face to face, missionary style with Hannibal leaving soft, gentle kisses all over Will's face while he carefully pressed in, giving them both a moment to adjust to the feeling before he went any further.

He looked into Will's eyes and smoothed his curls back from his forehead. Will murmured, eyes hazy with pleasure and excitement, "Go on, I'm ready."

"I don't want to hurt you, my dear. You feel so…" the king squeezed his eyes shut, shaking with need to fuck in deep and hard. "So perfect, so exquisite. If I let go…"

“I want you to let go and I want you to hurt me,” Will smiled tearfully, happier than Hannibal had ever seen him. “I want everything you have to give me.”

He spread his thighs and lifted his legs up higher, framing Hannibal’s back, shaking but so sure.

“I have so much to give,” Hannibal gasped, thrusting another few rigid, thick inches in, “Oh, Will. God. If you knew how you feel to me, how you look. I’m worried I’ll be too much. Others have found me excessive…”

“I don’t care about them, I’m here now, and I’m yours.” Will grabbed his face and kissed him greedily, “You’re mine tonight.”

He locked his ankles behind Hannibal’s back and lifted his hips to get Hannibal deeper. Hannibal moaned as velvety, tight heat pulled him in as if they had been made to fit together as one.

He didn’t need his hands anymore to guide his cock in, so he seized Will by the wrists and pressed him hard into the mattress, never looking away from his eyes as he slid further, then all the way, swallowed in Will’s tight channel while the boy’s lovely cock twitched, hard and wet, resting heavy against his stomach.

“Daddy,” Will whimpered in a kind of alarmed bliss that made Hannibal’s cock even harder inside him. “I’ve never been this full.”

“Feel that?” Hannibal dragged himself almost all the way out, then slid firmly back in, his girth making Will’s eyelashes flutter and his mouth drop open in silent shock. “Want more, sweet boy?”

“Y-yes,” Will moaned, legs clinging tighter and encouraging every long, slow, deep thrust as his wrists remained pliant in Hannibal’s vice grip. “Yes, yes – fuck, oh my God–”

“Shhhh,” Hannibal smirked fondly, half-chiding and half-soothing. He put his own hand over Will’s mouth and stroked his damp curls before bearing down harder and increasing the speed, rutting into Will with low, wolfish grunts. “Ssshhh, now, take it like a good boy, I know what a good boy you are, baby. Like that?”

He lifted his hand from Will’s hot lips, smiling at how Will had been drooling on him. He was still fucking in and out with those longer glides again, the ones that made Will feel every inch and made him wait a little too long for targeted presses to his prostate.

“Daddy,” Will pouted, incapable of other words, reaching with shaky hands to draw him down for another kiss. “*Daddy.*” After a few more sweat-soaked, musky minutes left him breathless and wild-eyed, he remembered another word. “Harder.”

“Oh, yes?” Hannibal pulled out of him only to flip him over to his stomach and shove his ass up for the taking, licking his hole and stroking himself. “You like being Daddy’s naughty little fucktoy, huh?”

“Yes!” Will exclaimed, grinning and delirious, tears spilling from his eyes. He quivered and clung to the bedding, moaning with pleasure at the king’s experiment with more depraved dirty talk.

“I see.” Hannibal admired the soft, adorable, pert ass before his eyes in a few moments of suspenseful quiet, then spanked Will nice and hard, living for the way Will buried his face in the sheets and bit down on a mouthful of them. “I see you like being a bad boy sometimes too and showing Daddy how impatient you are. Getting a little discipline. Then taking…” he squeezed and groped the luscious cheeks, his cock throbbing to get back inside the stunning creature begging on his sheets. “Taking every inch even harder, faster, till you can’t even breathe and you feel you’re being torn in half, because you’re Daddy’s pretty, needy little cockslut. Is that right, Will?”

“Yeah, I’m your little brat.” Will got up fully on hands and knees, swaying his pinkened, soft cheeks in a beckon call. His eyes were pure mischief. “I’ll *tease* you and *nag* you until I get what I want. I wanna see you out of your mind for me, and feel you taking all your energy and your stress out on me. Spank me and fuck me till I cry harder, come in me and fill me up, then fuck me again until your body gives out. I’ll wait for you to get hard again, but it won’t take long. I know how to make it happen.”

“You intolerably saucy thing,” Hannibal scolded, positioning himself at Will’s pretty, gleaming hole. He added more lube from a bottle they were sure to empty out by the break of dawn, then spat on Will’s entrance before sliding in again.

He loved watching his own cock disappearing slowly into Will’s tight heat, all while he grabbed the beautiful curves and gave a firm spank with every glide in and out. It was the most breathtakingly erotic sight he could ever have imagined. He moaned, husky, deep and lost in Will, “Mylimasis, so beautiful, so perfect,” and picked up the pace, soon pressing down on Will’s back to make the younger man lie down flat.

Savage with lust, he put his hands palms-down on the mattress and drilled into Will, biceps flexing with exertion as more pleasure shot through him with every delicious thrust. “Like that, baby?” his voice was ragged, just a slip of its usual command of English, his tone gone deeper, words slurring.

“Fuck, yes, don’t stop,” Will whimpered, biting the sheets to keep from screaming at the deep penetration and merciless pummeling of his g spot. “Daddy, make me your ragdoll, I’m such a whore for you. Split me open, fuck me *so* hard, so hard…”

“God, Will, you’re killing me,” Hannibal groaned, collapsing on top of him, tugging his hair in one hand and using the other to wrap around his shoulder, growling in his ear, fucking nonstop, “do you like to be choked, darling?”

“Fuck, yes – and fuck me harder when you do it–”

Hannibal grabbed his neck tightly and pummeled him with rough thrusts, the total fusion of the position making his heart squeeze with combined love and lust. His head spun with it as he let go of Will’s throat to lay his hand over the boy’s on the sweat-soaked, musky sheets. The tender touch complimented the harsh bite he laid on that pretty, very over-bitten neck,

and the way he rocked his hips even faster, until all of a sudden he was coming as if he'd been flung out of the earthly realm and landed adrift in a sea of pleasure beyond all description. His hips now shuddered almost violently against Will, who was grinding into the sheets, until Hannibal, still shaking from head to toe, withdrew, causing plenty of thick white cum to drip from the boy's hole.

"Did I say you could come?" Hannibal asked brusquely, arranging Will in front of him, the boy lying helplessly on his back. The king kneeled between the younger man's trembling, milky thighs.

"No your majesty," Will shivered, his cock looking almost painfully hard. "I'm so sorry. And first, I should th-thank you for filling me up with your hot cum."

"You certainly should," Hannibal smiled, lowering his head to nuzzle the boy's aching length. "That's more like it, sweetheart."

"And now, if you'll, um, forgive me, can I please, please come, your highness? Please, Daddy?"

"You'll be the death of me, you shameless little minx," Hannibal said with a long, desperate shiver of his own ongoing arousal, not weakened even when mere physiology caused his cock to slightly soften. Still, with the sight of the boy laid out on *his* grand royal bed, thighs spread and Hannibal's sticky seed leaking from his well-used hole, he was hypnotized by blinding desire.

He sucked Will's beautiful cock with all the energy he could spare at the moment, after such a powerful lovemaking session that they were both red in the face and covered in sweat, unable to control their shaking, muffling their moans as best they could. While laving his tongue adoringly over the stiff, hot cock, he murmured lazily, slipping a finger deep inside Will using no other lube than spit and his own cum, "You're going to come all over Daddy's hand like a good boy, aren't you, Will?"

Will's back arched as his balls tightened and an aching gasp flew from his lips along with "*Yes!* Yes, sir…"

Hannibal only got the chance to solidly fuck him three times with two fingers before Will's body squeezed him so tight, they both lost their breath, and cum spurted from the boy's cock to be licked up and savored by Daddy.

Then they lay flat on their backs, holding hands, with Will's leg flung over Hannibal's, staring at the ceiling and breathing heavily, hearts racing.

This went on for quite some time, surreal and honest and rather perfect, before Will turned on his side and kissed Hannibal's shoulder, and the king kissed his forehead.

"Why did you stay here after I admonished you so cruelly?" he asked gently, really needing to understand.

"Does it matter now?" Will laughed brightly. "After *that*?"

“I need to know exactly how close I came to losing you so I can properly upbraid myself and avoid ever, *ever* falling into such error again.”

Obsessive kisses all over Will’s face, neck and shoulder, despite the king still being physically exhausted, made the younger man distracted and dizzy. He giggled and said, “I can barely think with you doing that, you know. Truth is, I didn’t want to leave Abigail. I told her I’d be here for Christmas. And…if I’d been honest with myself, which I pretty much wasn’t…I cared – I care – about *both* of you too much to leave. Even if you *were* a total ass.”

“Abel said that, too,” Hannibal chuckled. “I can’t disagree.”

He hovered above the boy, tracing his cheeks, feeling the rough stubble, then rediscovering him so slowly by hand, artist’s touch memorializing the stunning features for his future fantasies, forever wanting to save this moment and return to it. He traced Will’s adorable ear and gave it a lick followed by a nip of his sharp, fang-like teeth as his hot breath tickled Will. The boy wriggled and gasped, his hands flying up to touch Hannibal, stroking through his chest hair.

“I gave you so many mixed signals…I don’t know why you put up with me,” the king lamented.

“Well, what you gave me tonight was a very *clear* signal,” Will laughed, “To say the least!”

“Am I forgiven, my angel?” Hannibal muttered, his hand starting to slide firmly down Will’s side, pausing at his hip for a claiming squeeze.

“I guess so, if I *have* to,” Will sighed, pretending to be annoyed. “*And* if you’re planning to fuck me again right now.”

“You’re a mind reader,” Hannibal grinned, his heart lifting higher than it had in years. He kissed Will’s lips several more times and started grinding, their fingers interlaced on the bed. “And I think I’m about to be forgiven.”

As his touch grew naughtier, Will dissolved into more muffled moans, somewhere in between managing to say in his brattiest, most sultry tone, “And can I have all my presents back, Daddy?”

Chapter End Notes

Next time: As the new lovers grow ever closer, Frederick is scheming again, Bedelia arrives, and Hannibal must confront the many pressures trying to keep him from the man he loves.

Winter things

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Frederick barreled down the hall, making his impatient way to the King's private bedchambers with an indignant expression. His majesty had not emerged from his royal room all morning, and it was now early afternoon. Two highly important events had occurred while King Hannibal apparently decided he deserved an impromptu lie-in, and Frederick was fit to be tied.

He knocked on the door with a certain polite force, only to find he received no answer. "What the devil?" he asked under his breath, baffled with consternation.

Inside the luxurious bedroom, the curtains were still drawn, keeping it dim. Hannibal had tried, really he had, to stop continually kissing and touching Will, but the endeavor of resistance met with sad but glorious failure.

"We should get up now," Will said in a daze. He was presently lying naked, flat on his back, and Hannibal was looking for something in the wardrobe, coming back with a beaming smile. "What are you doing, you very bad man?"

"Something," Hannibal winked. Looking very mischievous indeed, he climbed on the bed beside Will, who was stretched out like a lazily scrumptious grecian forest nymph, a crown of curls instead of laurels, a sheen of sweat and a curious, irresistible sparkle in blue eyes driving Hannibal crazy once again.

The King, too, was nude and Will stared at him with a goofy, adoring, lustful smile, blue eyes trailing over every inch of muscular golden skin as if they hadn't been rolling around in these satin sheets the entire night. Someone this stunning couldn't just be gotten over once you saw them naked once, twice…seven times? Will had lost count of the entire tally. They'd pushed their bodies past any level of normal sexual endurance, drawing out pleasures only achievable through long, committed efforts – *worthwhile* efforts. Still, they were far from sated.

When Hannibal revealed two gorgeous crimson silk scarves, the younger man did not resist having his hands and feet bound, rendering him helpless. In fact, he assisted with a pleased smirk, putting forth his wrists and remaining faithfully pliant while his royal sexiness tied his ankles with that perfect combination of snug but not painfully tight pressure.

Soon Will found himself on his side in a little spoon position. One big, hot hand was clamped possessively to his thigh while Hannibal's free arm hooked around his neck, holding him tightly while the king fucked the tutor to his heart's content. The knowledge that Will absolutely couldn't have escaped this if he wanted to was so damn kinky and arousing, he was breathless, attuned with detailed sensitivity to every long, slow, deep thrust of Hannibal's huge manhood in his tight body. His skin was covered in goosebumps while he panted, whispering weakly, "Hannibal…Hannibal…"

"*It's your majesty,*" Hannibal growled in Will's ear, tugging it with his teeth. He tightened his hold on the boy in both places, a light chokehold and a rough grope on the curve of Will's thigh, the scarves tight enough to make the younger man helpless.

He let go the arm around Will's neck and reached for the au pair's smooth, pale chest, rubbing knowing fingers over hard nipples, "Pay me proper homage, boy, if you know what's good for you."

In order to encourage this, and since Will had not replied as yet with anything but more breathy, soft moans, especially submissive when bound, to the king's sheer delight, Hannibal pulled out almost all the way and *slammed* back in hard, hitting Will's prostate right on target.

Will meant to swear or scream or something in that categorical vicinity, yet all that emerged from his lips was a whimpered "Your Royal Highness!"

Hannibal smiled and kissed Will's flushed cheek, then pulled his hair roughly. He also shoved his hips against Will's ass with a loud slap of skin to skin, making sure the younger man was so aware of every inch of his rigid dick that the boy shivered and mewled.

"Yes?" Hannibal inquired, tugging Will's head back to make eye contact with sapphire eyes full of pleasured tears. His own amber stare blazed with commanding insistence and a twinkle of teasing.

"Your Majes-tyyy," Will whined as Hannibal began thrusting in and out faster, still fucking hard, grabbing his hip, his hands quick to fly to all the places on Will's bruised and bitten body which formed a fetish fixation for him. "I am but your – ahh! Your humble servant… unworthy, *fuck-fuck-fuck, oh my God, yes* of such a wise, fair and mighty– cock, I mean ruler!"

"Oh, I know you're my humble servant," Hannibal grinned ruthlessly as his hand moved deftly to Will's aching hard-on. "But you do deserve me, sweetheart. And everything I want to give you in return for your faithful devotion…"

Stroking Will now, he went on fucking, rocking in and out more slowly but just as deeply, mouthing at Will's neck.

"Did you hear that?" Will murmured confusedly, between moans, "I think someone knocked on your door."

"Probably." Hannibal bit Will's neck and went right on making love to him, only the gritty tone of his words mixed up with groans of ecstasy to indicate their scandalous union. "I skipped two meetings this morning…well," he slowed down even more to torment Will and watched as his engorged, reddened member pulled gradually from the tight, slick embrace of Will's sweet little body, then slid back in, making both of their spines tingle.

"One of them was a press conference, and the other a meeting with the – oh, I don't remember," Hannibal admitted, speeding up his movements again.

The knock sounded again, loud and indignant, this time followed by Frederick's voice calling, "Your majesty! I'll have to send medics in to make sure you are well if you continue silent!"

"Oops," Will giggled, "Did I distract you, Daddy, get you in trouble?"

"Hush, naughty thing," Hannibal muttered, covering Will's mouth with one hand and slowly, deliberately stroking him off with the other. "Let Daddy take care of business."

He cleared his raspy throat and shouted back, "I'm dreadfully sorry, Frederick, but I've been detained by a head cold. It's been terribly *hard.* I'll call everyone involved and reschedule personally later on."

The added arousal of potentially being caught and of shamelessly fucking while Hannibal's annoying advisor lingered so close outside the door made Will bite his lover's hand with a soft whine. He came, hips shuddering, ass automatically slapping back onto Hannibal's dick, bound hands and feet tingling with joy, the orgasm extended by the king's relentless pounding into him.

"It's highly irregular, but I suppose if you've been ill, it's understandable," Frederick replied crisply. "Be sure to reschedule post haste, your majesty. The local Christmas choirs were so looking forward to performing for you, and the press were hoping for an early hint at your upcoming big announcement. Remembering the announcement's to take place very soon now?"

"Hmm," Hannibal mused, *very* absent-minded. "Announcement, yes. I'll take care of it, now leave me in *peace*–" He came inside Will, warm cum filling the boy while the older man snarled and pulled out to watch his seed dripping from his cock and Will's hole. "To recover!"

He thrust back into the perfect, velvety tightness of Will and rode his orgasm out savagely, Will ragdoll limp in his arms, meekly crying out, "Daddy, Daddy, please…" softly, too softly for Frederick to hear, even as the advisor said coldly,

"Then I will see you at our lunch meeting, your highness."

"Until then, Frederick," Hannibal beamed with naughtiness and grabbed Will's hips for one last hard thrust.

"I…t-think we probably ought to get up now," Will shivered.

"Theoretically," Hannibal agreed, about as sensible as he could seem under the circumstances.

He untied Will tenderly and kissed him gently on the places where the scarves had bound him on his delicate wrists and ankles.

"Every inch of you is so beautiful, my dear," he sighed, hair hanging softly in his eyes, breaths still coming hard.

Will rolled over and Hannibal pulled him into a warm hug, letting out another sigh that sounded downright sad and regretful.

“I’ll still be in love with you if we shower and go down to start the day,” Will assured him. “Good thing it’s Saturday, or poor Abigail would be wondering why I didn’t turn up for her lessons…”

“What?” Hannibal’s body tensed. He cupped Will’s face and stroked his cheeks and jaw, looking astonished. “What did you say?”

Will grinned playfully. “I said it’s a good thing it’s Saturday,” he began, earning a few good spanks from Daddy.

“Not that, you adorable little brat, the other–”

“Ohhh, *that*...” Will batted his eyelashes and bit his lip. “I love you, your majesty.”

“Oh, Will,” Hannibal sighed more happily, flipping their positions to hover over the younger man, kissing him deeply. “Will…”

“I swear, I’ll never leave you again unless you want me to, so don’t worry,” Will said between near-frantic kisses, “don’t let me keep you from any important duties. I’m not going any–”

“No,” Hannibal said, kissing Will’s neck, then his chest, leaving a trail of wet, biting kisses that made the boy moan.

His head moved lower, and Will’s fingers threaded through sweaty silver locks proved he was equally resolved to be fucked out of his mind again, in return for his profession of love.

Will threw his head back, curls flopping around his forehead as fingers tightened in silky hair and Hannibal’s mouth found the head of his cock, half-hard again. He looked up at his boy with a sly shimmer in his eyes.

“No,” Hannibal repeated, “You’re not going anywhere, Will.”

He smirked again and got back to work.

***

Will decided he was going to do his very best not to tempt the king to miss any more engagements. After all, a concert from the local choirs might not be that big of a deal, but the press conference sounded important. Hannibal cared so much about being a good king, and Will wouldn’t want to ruin his attention to duty by being a selfish and insatiable lover.

He dressed very properly for the day after scooting rapidly to his own room wearing last night’s clothes. A crisp white button-up under a pine green sweater vest with a matching tie, a pair of fitted black trousers and shiny new shoes from the big gift boxes which he had accepted back into his room.

It amused Will to see that Abel had left all the boxes stacked up in the hall outside his door, clearly assuming the au pair was likely to change his mind about the rejection.

He spritzed on some of the fresh, invigorating cologne the king had given him and looked in the mirror. There, he wasn't too sexy, surely, and he must keep his features and comments equally chaste when he saw his majesty again. Will could do that, of course he could.

His laptop began beeping melodically, and Will spun from the bathroom mirror to see there was a video call coming in from the States.

He sat down and opened the call to see none other but his three former roommates sitting in what so recently was also his living room (it felt about the size of a closet with all four of them in it watching tv, that he remembered all too well, even as he resided these days in enormous private rooms with nothing but the best of everything).

"What are you doing?" Brian asked as Jimmy shouted, "What's going *on*?" and Beverly chimed in, "Are you officially a prince yet?"

"Shhhh," Will urged, turning red. He lowered the lid of his laptop as if threatening to end the call.

"Wait, wait, wait," his friends all urged in chaotic non-unison.

"Hi, guys," Will sighed, giving them another chance. "Of course I'm not *a prince*" – whispering, "and what's going on is, uh…complicated and a long story…"

"C'mon, spill it!" Beverly threw her hands up in frustration at having to wait for the juicy update.

"It's just that the King is…a fascinating man," Will began awkwardly, "And…we've become close…"

"I knew it," Brian enthused, holding his hand up to give Jimmy a high five although the other man refused and stuck his tongue out instead. "Sore loser. I bet Jimmy twenty bucks you and his royal flirty-ness were already an item."

"It's obnoxious to gloat when you win such an easy bet," Jimmy grumbled, passing his friend a twenty dollar bill. "I admit I thought it would take longer."

"Good job," Beverly grinned, causing Will to turn even redder.

"For God's sake it's not like…it's *new,* and it's delicate…I don't expect it to last, I don't expect anything at all."

"Huh?" Brian asked, scratching his beard, glancing at Jimmy for a source of logic. Jimmy frowned. "What?"

"Wait a minute, is it a relationship or not?" Jimmy added, brow furrowed in that way he got when nothing made sense.

“Are you dating?” Beverly chimed in, so concerned now that she set aside the takeout container of what looked like chicken tikka masala which she had been snacking on.

The three roommates were sitting so close together their shoulders touched, both due to the tiny room and trying to all interact on the same video call. This made them look like the cast of a hilarious new “living single in the city” sitcom about to premiere on network tv, but instead of laughing, Will absorbed the worrisome content of their words and sighed.

“I don’t know? It’s been a night. And a morning. Yesterday I thought we were on completely different pages,” Will explained. “Then he opened up to me and that made me open up…was it a good idea? Do I have some kind of a real shot at a relationship with a *king* who – even if he did want that – is gonna be deluged on all sides *not* to date some random American commoner? He has all these advisors hounding him to marry some Lithuanian duchess while the press sells stories like Hannibal’s already engaged to one of these women who come from his own world. They want the fairy tale, I’m not it.”

“Au contraire,” Jimmy argued, “What about Cinderella?”

“I don’t know about Cinderella,” Will lied, as if he hadn’t secretly cherished the daydream that this love with Hannibal was his very own Cinderella story come true.

“But what about Abigail?” Will tried to be sensible, always a struggle for his dreamy mind. “I don’t want to disrupt her life after all she’s been through by trying to force some kind of ‘insta-family’ on her out of nowhere.”

“Doesn’t she like you?” Beverly asked, sipping a can of iced tea while Brian elbowed Jimmy to move over and Jimmy only moved closer in revenge, bumping their hips together.

“I think so. It’s all too fast, it’s a whirlwind,” Will moaned into his hands. “What do I do?”

“It’s a whirlwind?” Beverly shrugged. “I know what I’d do. Get carried away. See where you land.”

“Otherwise, you’ll always wonder,” Jimmy reasoned.

“Will he?” Brian had to argue with Jimmy; otherwise, life would be too weird. “I’m not so sure. Sometimes when you take a shot with the prom queen, you end up on the sidelines with the other worshippers.”

“I *would* always wonder,” Will concluded. Ignoring Brian. If Jimmy had been pessimistic than Brian would have said the same thing Jimmy said and vice versa. This wasn’t any kind of logic one could use unless coming from within their friend circle, but to Will it was second nature.

He sat up straighter, anxiously balled fists relaxing on the knees of his pants. “I don’t even know if it’s a choice, or if I have one. Where Hannibal’s concerned, I always seem to get carried away.”

His smile was a tense thing, but no less beautiful for that. He felt his happiness balanced in every literary metaphor he knew, butterfly wings, edges of knives unknown, he was all caught up and tangled somewhere in between. With bated breath, it occurred to him not for the first time – maybe Hannibal was the only one who could untangle him.

***

“We’re going to see the lights display in the capital this evening.” Hannibal’s voice came soft and warm against Will’s ear the first chance he got after a busy day.

Will had been such a good boy, spending the day mostly alone, except for a walk in the snowy garden with Abigail which again quickly became a snowball fight. He’d lost the battle not to appease Abigail, which she would consider an insult and he must concur was bad sportsmanship, but because he couldn’t get his head or his heart to shut up about the whole situation with the handsome king.

The rest of his time, Will had spent in listless wandering, but kept politely out of Hannibal’s view. He used his new sketching pencils and watercolors to make a few pictures reflecting his new life at the castle; he took the time to speak separately with two of the castle's servants - Daina and Tomas - who did not realize they were in love. After a fun bit of holiday matchmaking, he did think he'd made the best of the day, all things considered.

Now he was in the library, stretched out on a low “fainting couch” by the window with a stunning old hardcover edition of *Dubliners* pressed to his chest.

He’d been reading for a while but had paused to wistfully look out through the glass doors in front of him to the developing twilight which wrapped the sky in lilac and lace, as it seemed to him. The clouds were confections when looked at from on high, from way up there - almost at the top of the castle. He felt simultaneously he was flying and floating in his heart but his stomach feared the fall; his mind clung to reason that fell away vaporous as the evening mist when he tried to touch it and keep it close.

The King had to make up for the lost engagements by obfuscating with the press and traveling to the village square for a special make-up performance from the local choirs. He’d also been in a phone conference in his office that lasted a while. Or so Will had been told when he casually asked the servants.

Still, Hannibal only seemed concerned with two people in his life at present: Will and Abigail.

This made the faint crease of a not-so-reluctant, sentimental smile soften Will’s stressed-out face.

“I’d hoped that you…might like to come along,” Hannibal went on, brown eyes showing insecurity of his own.

That snapped Will in half like a twig, without Hannibal even trying. The raw power which this king held over him was breathtaking, an addiction of aching, fearful vulnerability, suspense and need.

“Of course I’d love to,” Will smiled warmly.

“We’ll leave shortly, then, as I’ve already summoned the carriage.” Hannibal said this so calmly and casually, but his eyes sparkled. He sat on the floor in front of Will’s couch with his long legs stretched out, his lap as ever looking like an appealing place to sit. The most appealing, in fact.

“*The carriage*?” Will sat up and the book tumbled towards the floor, landing in Hannibal’s fast moving hand.

“Of course, my dear, for what other means of conveyance could hope to be worthy of you on such a magical and festive occasion?” Hannibal leaned over and kissed the back of Will’s hand, lips curving in a smile, the warm, soft press of his lips getting the tutor quite riled all over again. It was a teasing, knowing gesture, yet utterly sincere.

Will felt he was being courted by a king, really courted. Hannibal’s intentions hardly seemed casual here, unless he was the world’s greatest con artist.

Since he was still staring down at his lover wordlessly, trying and failing to process all that his life was becoming, Hannibal added, “And besides, Abigail loves to go in the carriage. We’ll bring Nicki Minaj and Pepsi.”

Will burst into giggles, holding his stomach. “I still can’t quite believe those are the names of your royal horses, your majesty.”

“You naughty, intentional, lovely little minx,” Hannibal growled softly, this time gently biting Will’s hand, then kissing the pale skin more wetly, making heat spread through the tutor’s body. “You know what it does to me when you call me that. Sadly for you, there’s no time for me to give you what you deserve at present.”

“Well, it is your, ummm, your official title,” Will turned red and scratched the back of his neck. His gaze fell from Hannibal’s fondly accusing smirk and raced around the room haphazardly, gravity falling away again.

“Oh? I thought that was ‘your royal Daddiness.”

Will laughed, slightly mortified, and came down from the couch, settling into Hannibal’s lap, instantly relieved and aroused at the feeling. Hannibal simply felt so big, comforting, protecting and warm, strong arms wrapping around him tightly at once, the book still absent-mindedly clasped in one hand.

“Are you ever gonna let that whole 'your royal Daddiness' thing go? I was so hard when I said that, there was no blood flowing to my brain for intelligent thought.”

Hannibal chuckled. “No, I do not intend to let it go, sweet boy, not when it makes you blush so prettily and bite your lip in that wanton but innocent manner. Although we have other plans for the early evening, I will be following up on this situation later on. Perhaps we should break in your rooms, since we have already laid mine to waste.”

Will grimaced with a low laugh, thinking of the way they'd left the room in very late haste earlier that day, the bed an absolute disaster, its strong frame definitely weakened by their shenanigans. The huge bed had actually been crooked, knocked out of proper position while they fucked *that* hard. The breakfast which they'd ordered to help them calm down and begin the day in earnest had been hand fed to each other with increasing sloppiness until the whole table was similarly wrecked while they writhed atop it, Will becoming the king's new breakfast while he threw his head back and moaned, carried away to heaven by Hannibal's expert, relentless treatment of his well-used hole that only longed to be filled with his royal lover once more, a need soon after – temporarily satisfied.

The bathroom had been left in a shambles of hot steam, soap bottles and towels tossed aside and slammed to the floor while Will found himself hoisted onto the sink, then later pressed greedily to the shower wall, a big hand in his hair tugging curls, a hot mouth on his neck biting, sucking, bodies which could barely summon the ability to get hard or come again pushed far past limitations to draw out the slightest, nearly impossible orgasms from grinding and stroking – it almost didn't seem to matter if they came, because it seemed to be all about their two bodies in desperate, endless collision, perfect communication, holy communion. It was about touching, kissing and intimacy, about the yearning for what they couldn't even take from each other nor give till they finally rested their sex-addled bodies. It was amazing in its own sweetly tormenting way.

"The staff are well-capable of cleaning my rooms, sweetheart." Hannibal smiled adoringly at Will's regretful, almost guilty look. "I can do as I please, and I think I have waited long enough to see that. I am after all, King."

"Mmm, you are," Will sighed, "My king."

He tried to keep the clouds from his sapphire eyes without total success. His damaged heart kept questioning whether the King could *really* defy expectations - those of his closest advisors and hell - a whole nation - to choose a partner like him.

Hannibal did not question the slightly melancholy tinge to his lover's smile, not yet, though he seemed determined to bring sunshine back into it.

He grinned and took advantage of how closely Will had pressed to him with arms clamped needily to his back. He lifted up, carrying Will along, and sat on the couch, answering Will's look of surprise with an airy "There, that's better, isn't it?"

"You're gonna break your back," Will fretted, entranced by Hannibal's easy strength far more than he worried.

Sometimes it seemed the king was superhuman, except for his fragile heart. He appeared to be able to do whatever he liked to Will with minimal effort, making the younger man tremble at the mere thought of how that strength could be used in the future in so many ways.

"I know what I'm about, lovely one." Hannibal kissed the tip of Will's nose and both red cheeks, nuzzling their faces together with a contented sigh. "Daddy's good boy. What have you been reading, hidden away in here like a shining jewel encased in a dull monastery?"

“It’s um, James Joyce,” Will explained, flustered by the words, adding shyly, “Daddy.”

“Hmm,” Hannibal hummed with interest. With Will still sat on his lap as if it was storytime, he thumbed through the book, reading softly aloud the first lines he saw.

“*“Her name sprang to my lips at moments in strange prayers and praises which I myself did not understand. My eyes were often full of tears (I could not tell why) and at times a flood from my heart seemed to pour itself out into my bosom. I thought little of the future. I did not know whether I would ever speak to her or not or, if I spoke to her, how I could tell her of my confused adoration.”*

He looked at Will intently. “Beautiful words.”

Will’s eyes *were* full of tears, just like the narrator in the story. “Yes.”

“Tell me again, darling?” Hannibal’s voice had gone husky and he looked at Will as one would regard a masterpiece of art in a museum or even the loftiest sparkling star in the night sky, brighter than diamonds twisted under morning sun.

“I love you, Daddy,” Will answered immediately, “I love you.”

“And I love you, sweetheart.” Hannibal kissed his forehead, warm lips pressing to clammy skin with an instant magic like medicine to heal all of Will’s emotional ailments.

“You don’t have to say that,” Will ducked his head. “Just because I did.”

“Will Graham.” Hannibal tugged his face up by pulling a handful of soft curls, forcing Will to return his searching, lovingly stern stare.

It was a hard stare which would brook no resistance.

“Do you truly believe I would say such important words if I did not both mean them and deeply wish to impart them? Hmm?” Punctuating each gentle rebuke with a soft kiss to Will’s face, first both of his cheeks, then his jawline, his lips, “Do you think I wake up every day feeling as I do today? Or that I would really mislead you so cruelly as to pretend that I feel more for you than I do?”

His deep voice rumbled over the tender scolding, and when Will’s lower lip trembled, Hannibal’s hand went slack in his hair.

He hugged Will close again. “Everything is alright now, my darling and so are you. Daddy’s here and going to take care of you forever more. I wish you would let go of your worries.”

“I guess,” Will sniffled, shivering against his lover, too overwhelmed to process all that the King had said. “I don’t know how to.”

“Ah. Then, new as I am myself to the process, I shall simply have to teach you how.” Hannibal bounced Will lightly on his lap, as if he was the most perfect, petted puppy to be spoiled once again excessively. “Starting with a very special outing tonight. Are you amenable, my dear?”

Will gave him a cutely lopsided smile and nodded, still clinging childishly to the King's fancy waistcoat. "Yes, I'd love to."

***

"I can't believe I'm riding in a real royal carriage," Will marveled, staring all around the interior of the gorgeous, Victorian style vehicle.

Outside, the two horses clopped merrily along down the long, twisting downhill path towards the capital city. Snow fell, big fat flakes of it that Abigail said reminded her of the marshmallows in her hot cocoa from breakfast. The sky was a wistful lilac dabbed as if by nature's own paintbrush by a dazzling swipe of luscious pink.

"You see that color pink?" Hannibal had leaned forward from his seat across from Will and Abigail. While his daughter's attention was thoroughly focused on staring out the circular window at the scenery drifting by, the King murmured in Will's ear, "It reminds me distinctly of the color in your cheeks when you blush so charmingly."

Will chortled. His sweaty hands were doing some sort of baffling wrestling match amongst themselves in his lap, while his heart beat out a tango timed to every little word and look from his handsome, royal lover.

"And as for the times you *really* make me blush, I suppose the best reference would be…a lobster when it first hits the boiling water?" Will smirked. He bumped Hannibal's knee with his own but they drew back automatically when Abigail turned from the window to look at her traveling companions.

"Oh, come off it, you two," she rolled her cornflower eyes, the very picture of sophisticated wisdom, prim yet mischievous as ever. "It is perfectly obvious you have some kind of *thing* going on, and you needn't hide it from me."

"What?" Hannibal blurted as Will let out a surprised, "Who, us?"

"Yes, you," Abigail shrugged. "Nicki Minaj and Pepsi could see it, it's that obvious."

"Do you really think they noticed?" Will winced.

She burst into giggles. "Most likely."

"We had intended to wait a while longer before telling you we were a couple, Abigail." Hannibal looked mildly concerned. "I would never want you to feel rushed along to accept such a new arrangement in our family life."

"If it were anyone else, I suppose I would be cross and pull more dreadful pranks on you and Will," Abigail acknowledged with a lofty shrug, adjusting her little white winter gloves on the lap of her pink coat. "As it is…I obviously 'love' you both," she threw up elegant air quotes at this and rolled her eyes. "And want you to be happy. You make each other smile. It could be a lot worse?"

"Could it?" Will inquired, relieved at her response, touched by her words.

“Yes, if Father had married that Duchess Bedelia lady, I would have to stock up on the fake rodents and neon green hair dye.” Abigail cringed. “Her eyes look like Maleficent and I don’t like her voice. She’s always like, ‘Oh, little princess Abigail, look how you’ve grown!’ and forgets me about two seconds after.”

Hannibal even gave into the good-natured laughter that filled the warm coach bobbing along down the cold road. His worries about his daughter’s feelings ebbed away, leaving him looking once again content.

“I’m glad the competition didn’t impress you,” Will chuckled. *Not that I ever worry about the competition. Heh, heh.*

“What about my schooling, then?” Abigail raised her eyebrows. “If you’re to be together, Will wouldn’t still work for us, right? It seems a little weird.”

“It would be,” Hannibal agreed smoothly. “No, while we are both delighted to help with your studies at any time, after the holidays, I think it may be time you joined the other students at the village school. Would you like that, Abigail?”

She clapped her hands excitedly. “Oh, Father, truly? It’s what I’ve always wanted, to be with the other children instead of alone at the castle.”

“I’ve kept you ‘safe’ for too long by holding you back from life,” Hannibal acknowledged. “I have to let you go a *little* bit if you’re to have the things every child needs to grow into themselves and find their joy.”

“A little bit?” Abigail snarked agreeably.

“Yes,” her father replied with a sparkle in his eyes. “A little bit. No dating until you’re twenty-five.”

“Oh, *please,*” Abigail waved him off, “Dating? Ew.” She mimed sticking her finger in her mouth as a further gesture indicating the utmost “grossness.”

“That’s it,” Hannibal beamed, “That’s just the attitude…”

“Honey,” Will chided, “That isn’t going to be her attitude when she’s fifteen, you know.”

“I suppose we shall have to cross that bridge when we come to it,” Hannibal acknowledged, wincing but again smiling.

“So, it’s settled,” Abigail agreed with another shrug, casual but about as pleased as she was willing to let on. Her small smile seemed to suggest that she was very happy with her father’s choice of potential step-parent in her life – very pleased indeed.

Hannibal reached across and gave Will’s hand a warm squeeze, eyes locked on Will’s face as it looked alight with the wonder of the moment and the hazy twilight now fading into dusky blue, ever darkening although the bright snowflakes cascading over the coach lent a flicker of illumination. More Christmas magic.

The carriage was unbelievably luxurious; the seats were each like a small couch with plush velvet cushions in a soft creme shade and golden buttons to match the colors of the exterior. Behind each was an actual hand-woven, antique looking tapestry of beautiful medieval princes and princesses dancing at a ball. Overhead, the ceiling was covered in another tapestry, this one portraying the royal Lecter family crest, creme against shimmering bronze. Curtains in a regal dark yellow were cordoned to the sides of the seats with thick tasseled ribbons.

Hannibal sat there in his Soldier-Looking Hottie Coat with his silverly hair swept back from his forehead, ungelled and soft-looking, destined to fall slowly over his brow as the night went on. His lightly tanned skin was piqued, first by the cold and later anxiety turning into excitement, so that he too held a blush. Leather gloves were held with dapper nonchalance against his tan, fitted trousers, and Will could smell the intoxicating cologne wafting from his perfect body heat where he just wanted to snuggle in forever. It all seemed bizarrely as if this was actually real, as if this was truly happening to Will, or crazily enough, as if he was, after all, Cinderella.

“I must be dreaming,” he sighed as the driver turned the coach easily onto the main street in town, where every building was draped in dazzling Christmas lights.

The shimmering colors reflected on the snow and melted into Will’s heart.

Subtle overhead speakers were playing Christmas songs and by now Abigail was delightedly looking at the lights and waving at the townspeople who passed them outside, throwing roses at the royal carriage. She sang along happily to “All I Want for Christmas is You,” bopping her head back and forth.

“What do you mean, mylimasis?” Hannibal smiled, beckoning for Will to join him on his side of the seats.

Will sat beside him, hands chastely clasped given Abigail’s presence, and that was quite enough to get his heart thundering in his ears.

“I never thought…” he shook his head and choked back a small sob. Pressed his lips together as the King swept a curl behind his ear. “I never had a Christmas like this in my whole life and I never really thought I would. I guess…I just hoped, but I don’t even know why I held onto that hope so hard.”

“A life preserver amidst the treacherous rapids of modern dating,” Hannibal nodded his understanding, sweetly brushing away a tear from the younger man’s flaming cheeks. “Part of you must have known you would get here someday, beloved.”

Will couldn’t even speak, so he just nodded back and swallowed hard. He had never cried so much for so many completely different reasons as he had since bumping into King Hannibal with that cart in the hotel. He had never felt so alive.

***

Cameras predictably flashed as the King and Princess stepped down from the carriage into the city night, neatly making their way to the cobblestoned, snow-sprinkled sidewalk with Will close behind.

“Isn’t this risky?” Will asked, following along while Hannibal walked adroitly towards a large, gorgeous old museum, Abigail’s gloved hand clasped in his own.

“Certainly not, so long as we walk slowly. The snow was really quite light,” Hannibal smiled, continuing on his merry way.

Reporters, too controlled by proper decorum towards his majesty (or rather, the consequences of not showing it), followed with an almost comical desperation on the other side of the road, shouting questions at the King in Lithuanian. Will didn’t understand a single word.

“I’m not talking about that, smart-ass,” he said, getting that last word at the right angle so Abigail didn’t overhear. “As you know, I’m referring to us practically debuting as a couple right before Christmas on the main street of your capital out of nowhere. Pretty sure Frederick wouldn’t approve.”

He was also pretty damn sure the reporters were asking who the mysterious young man was who shared such familiar company with the king and princess.

“Hmm. Frederick, disapproving? All the more reason to proceed,” said Hannibal blithely.

He called back politely crisp responses in his native tongue to the reporters, never pausing in his confident strides; Abigail had obviously been through this enough times to know how to similarly charm the press while making it clear she wasn’t going to slow down enough for an interview. She was completely unfazed as the reporters began shifting attention to her and asking questions, most likely about how she was enjoying her holidays.

“I said splendidly,” Abigail informed Will by way of translation as they neared the museum, shook off the reporters and went inside.

Her tone was chirpy and bright as if she was in Disney World. Will guessed royal life must be somewhat like being in some version of Disney World a lot of the time, from the distortions of fame to the delights of the fairy tale. And of course, in his case, the exhilaration of the roller coasters.

“*Whoa*,” Will’s jaw dropped and he momentarily forgot about the flashing lights of paparazzo cameras and the nosy shouted questions from the reporters outside.

The grand museum lobby was decked out in more Christmas splendor, great big shining gold bells tied in glossy ribbons, classical carols playing as the crowd of cheerful patrons surprisingly parted like the sea to let His Majesty and The Dear Little Princess walk through to the ticket desk.

On the way, Will stared at the display of nativities, which were the largest and most elaborate he had ever seen. Some looked lifelike and graceful, others bejeweled or pearlized, one carved from wood and hand-painted in a folk art style.

“This is amazing,” he breathed.

“It’s the largest collection of nativities in Europe,” said Abigail, sounding halfway between Hermione Granger and the museum guide pamphlet.

She skipped along and hummed with the Christmas songs. “I prefer Santa’s sleigh, see there, Will?”

Will’s eyes darted where she indicated, an equally ornate and lovely statue of Santa, along with the elves and reindeer, the sleigh dotted with gleaming red gems.

“I feel like a little kid again,” he laughed, getting more relaxed and into the spirit.

“As you should,” Hannibal smiled, pleased to see Will’s shoulders drop and his breathing even out more.

He was already attuned to his lover’s small signs of ongoing anxiety and ready to soothe them at all times.

“Oh, your Royal Highness,” said the plump, rosy-cheeked clerk at the ticket desk, “It’s entirely free of charge for you, of course, sir.”

“Yes, of course,” squeaked her assistant, a gangly teen girl who looked like she might have just swallowed her gum at the sudden sight of royalty. She dropped into a curtsey not quite as appalling as Will’s and added, like Eliza Dolittle, “If you please sir,” before looking totally baffled at her own words.

Yes. The unbelievably handsome King, with his enormous and reassuring, beautiful presence had that effect on mere human beings, Will knew. You sort of wanted to swallow your gum and whisper prayers to the gods of hotness at the mere sight of him. What was Will, silly little lost artist drifter Will, compared with *King Hannibal*?

He barred the nagging thoughts from his happy mood as they joined the stream of guests slowly and contentedly making their way through the exhibit rooms filled with yet more exquisite nativity scenes from the world over. One which was made from seashells ended up as Will’s favorite, while Hannibal was partial to a slightly abstract scene made from clay. Abigail fell so in love with a nativity made up of teddy bears that Hannibal purchased a miniature version of it for her from the museum gift shop on their way out.

He also bought a snow globe for Will, one that featured two lovers dressed in cute winter coats, hats and gloves, standing under a cascade of glittery snow while staring into each other’s eyes. The base of the snow globe said something in Lithuanian, so Will asked for a translation, marveling at it his gift while Abigail signed autographs for some of the children who had approached her.

“Actually, I’ll be going to school not far from here after Christmas,” she told them excitedly.

“It says, *‘Welcome Home,’*” Hannibal murmured close by Will’s ear. He put an arm around the younger man and pressed a kiss into the curls atop Will’s head.

“So is this your boyfriend, Royal Highness?” asked a dimple-cheeked little girl, younger than Abigail, who had paused nearby at a stand displaying lollipops.

“Yes, indeed it is, young lady,” Hannibal beamed.

Will thought somehow his ears must be deceiving him, but that would not quite account for the floor under his feet seemingly becoming clouds.

“Oh! He’s cute,” the little girl giggled, going back to her business of choosing a candy.

“*Hannibal,*” Will muttered almost in a distress of joyful confusion, “Should you be saying that right out to people before it’s officially known?”

“I can’t hold it in, mylimasis. Do you mind?” Hannibal’s smile faded slightly. “I’ll certainly dial back the public displays of affection if they make you at all uncomfortable.”

“No, that’s not it,” Will laughed softly, “I love it. It’s more…I just want to make sure I don’t mess anything up for you.”

“You are incapable.” Hannibal kissed the back of Will’s hand.

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They had a delicious dinner of traditional comfort foods at a pretty little restaurant near the museum. While there, Will asked Hannibal why they weren’t being positively mobbed by the public.

“We didn’t even bring any security…they’re gonna be seriously pissed at you, you know,” he said to Hannibal over dessert.

“It’s good for them to get a little challenge every once in a while,” Hannibal joked, “Watching me all the time must be boring.”

“As if.” Will rolled his eyes with a laugh. “C’mon, spill it, how are we doing this tonight without having to peel off your many fans at every turn?”

“I’m the King, Will,” Hannibal said, rather loftily, although the twinkle of fun never left his eyes. “I’ve simply told the owners of each establishment that we are to be unbothered this evening, and they have had their own security…’all over it,’ as I believe you Americans would say?”

“Jesus,” Will’s eyes had widened and again he spoke under his breath to hide his more spicy pronouncements from Abigail. “I like the way you said ‘I’m the King, Will.’”

He’d imitated Hannibal’s husky tone, making the older man laugh and ruffle his curls.

The ride back to the castle was quiet and peaceful. A night could only be this ethereal and serene, Will thought, a breath away from Christmas and one’s wildest dreams. Abigail fell asleep, curled up on the seat across from Hannibal and Will, who cuddled close and looked

reverently out the window at the stars and festive lights passing them by. Something about this night felt, if not quite fragile…sacred.

But the return home was hardly peaceful. The spell of the night was nearly broken by the sight of hordes of yet more reporters, plus the team of Royal Advisors standing outside in the front courtyard giving official comments.

“How absurd of them to speak to the journalists without me,” Hannibal snipped.

He smothered a yawn; before noticing the hubbub, he had been snuggling Will and slowly stroking the younger man’s hand. “I haven’t approved any official statements,” he complained, frowning.

“Could the press have made it up here before we even got home – I mean in response to you going out with Abigail and I tonight?” Will wondered, baffled.

“I can’t imagine why that would garner this large a showing. And this impromptu press conference outside the palace on the night before–”
Hannibal’s face suddenly turned a shade of red Will had never seen before, and he looked as if he’d swallowed something that went down the wrongest way.

“What?” Will whispered, glancing at Abigail, still snoozing on the opposite cushion.

“The night before Christmas Eve,” Hannibal whispered back in a panic. He pressed a hand to his own forehead looking completely aghast. “The…”

“Yeah, so? You’re not making any sense, Hannibal, let me know what’s wrong so I can help you.”

“I’m not sure anyone can. Do you see that line of carriages coming up the back guest entrance drive there?” Hannibal pointed through the window and Will nodded.

Carriage after delicate, important-looking carriage arrived at the palace, seeming almost like they floated across the snow-misted grounds. Once lined up in an equally dainty row, the carriages opened in near-complete unison and released into this unpredictable evening occupants of the most regal and elegant breed.

The men all wore tuxes, the ladies puffy, bejeweled ball gowns.

They continued with business like deliberation up the path leading to the palace’s main entrance. No one looked at the King’s own carriage to see if it was occupied except for one lady, a petite blonde in a golden gown much more beautiful than any of the other dresses.

She came to the carriage and peered in, a wry look of surprise on her face.

“King Hannibal?” she asked, appearing somewhat amused until her eyes fell on Will. Then she noticed the sleeping princess and apparently felt even more confusion. “Whatever are you doing here?”

“I seem to have mislaid my phone,” Hannibal explained feebly. “And…neglected to recall the significance of tonight’s date to the royal calendar…forgive me, allow me to introduce Will Graham. Will, this is Lady Bedelia Du Maurier.”

“Charmed, I’m sure,” she said cooly, offering her tiny hand in a pearlescent glove to Will, who shook it as if worried it contained a weapon of some kind.

This woman gave him the chills for some reason, not the good kind - the Spidey sense kind where his empathy warned him he had just met a new potential enemy. Suddenly, Abigail's words from earlier rushed back to his memory: "*Her eyes look like Maleficent and I don’t like her voice*." Now he saw the princess' point.

“Same here,” said Will with equally transparent distrust. “Can *you* tell me what’s going on? Whatever it is seems to have struck his majesty here speechless. You know, what’s with all the guests?” He waved in their general direction, “and the fancy outfits, the press up at the front talking to Frederick? Is there a party going on tonight?”

“A ‘party’?” Her ladyship’s laugh was like the ring of the very sweetest silver bell.

Will felt an irrational urge to strangle her pale, pretty throat. She looked at Hannibal as if she owned him, and at Will as if she regarded a lesser creature - a temporary obstacle.

“My dear young man,” Lady Bedelia went on, rearranging the fur wrap which covered her pale shoulders, “This evening is the annual Christmas Ball, the grandest event the Lithuanian monarchy will hold all year. Every year, the most elite members of the noblest families–”

“Descend upon the castle like so many glittering plagues of locusts,” Hannibal groused, finally chiming in.

“Be that as it may, King Hannibal always hosts the ball personally. And this year’s ball is to be a very special affair indeed, as it will mark Princess Abigail’s first time attending–”

Abigail snored loudly as if to punctuate the point –

Hannibal squeezed his eyes shut and Will winced.

“And his royal highness the king is expected to make an announcement – regarding a long awaited marriage engagement.” Her smile – impossibly – was both warm and frozen to her elegantly menacing face.

“You don’t say,” Will marveled, pivoting wildly between fear and anger, uncertain where to land.

“I certainly do,” Bedelia affirmed. “And that is why poor, dear Frederick is up there fielding questions from reporters who are waiting to interview the king and princess, plus linger here all night anticipating the happy news of who will be the new royal consort.”

Hannibal had his head in his hand as he groaned. Will looked back and forth between them, desperate to understand.

Bedelia added, finishing the explanation looking pleased as punch: “And Hannibal, you are late to your own party.”

Chapter End Notes

Hope you enjoyed -- there's another chapter (Christmas ball!) and an epilogue left. Hope to update my other fics during the next couple of weeks. Been going through it IRL and would much rather be here writing about our boys. Back soon with the rest. ❤️

It's always, always been you

Chapter Notes

At last! Hope you enjoy the conclusion, loves ✨💚❤️

See the end of the chapter for more notes

There were a few things that Will had never, ever liked. Actually, they were his least favorite things in the whole world.

Crowds.
Snobs.
Overly formal occasions when he wasn't in the mood
Awkward situations.
Feeling like he stood out in an unflattering way in a pressured situation
Feeling lied to
Unpleasant surprises
Having to act fine when he was anything but fine
People who flirted with other people's lovers right in front of said actual, official, obvious lover
Sudden disillusionment after getting his hopes up.

The annual Christmas Ball at the Lithuanian Royal Palace managed to check each one of his top ten most hated situations right on the head, like some evil darts game where a very well-aimed sharp object hit him in the heart.

"Will, allow me to…" Hannibal trailed off, looking three different shades of mortified and regretful.

"I think you've done enough," Will retorted, keeping his eyes away from the King's seductively irresistible face. He wasn't even ready to deal with this, any of it.

Dealing with it before he had time to reflect and calm down would make him kick Lady Bedelia in the stomach, and delightful as it sounded, he preferred not to spend the holidays in jail and have his reputation besmirched by the Lithuanian media. He had a fleeting vision of poor, ailing Bedelia thanking Hannibal for saving her from that "crazed tutor" and gritted his teeth, forcing the idea away.

Gently, he leaned forward and woke Abigail. "Princess? Wake up now. There's a big party going on, it seems. Would you like to go in and get ready?"

"Hmm?" Abigail stirred and looked at him, baffled. "Will, what on earth do you mean? It's not my birthday."

With that, she curled up with a teddy bear from the gift shop and tried to go back to sleep.

“It’s the Christmas Ball, Abigail.” Hannibal stroked her hair and urged quietly, “Please, dear, we’re obligated to go inside. Although we aren’t properly dressed yet, we’ll simply have to make some excuse.”

“Excuse?” Will scoffed. “Pretty sure any journalists who aren’t here waiting for your *announcement* got some snaps of us in the capital, going to the museum and out to eat afterwards.”

“Do you let all your staff speak to you in such a way?” Bedelia inquired, amused but disapproving.

“Will is not merely–”

But Will had heard quite enough from his majesty that evening. “Save it, *Hannibal.*”

He glared at Bedelia to reinforce his casual manner towards the king, the intimacy he had reached, even if it was only to have it snatched predictably away.

Hannibal lingered behind, fuming silently for a few beats as Will stormed towards the castle.

“If only someone would *listen* to me,” Hannibal muttered, exasperated.

He looked from Bedelia’s smug, annoying expression to Abigail’s sleepy refusal to move an inch and Will’s speed-walking figure as he let himself in through the kitchen side door, waving a dismissive hand at the few reporters who noticed the royal tutor hastily returning after what, according to their social media updates from rival journalists, had been an intriguing night out on the town.

The royal tutor, who had ludicrous expectations of being more. Will hated himself. The stupid hope of it all. The *Christmas* of it all!

“Will?” Abel asked, on his way through the front foyer. “I was just bringing Frederick an extra blazer. Seems he spilled coffee on the first one after pulling an all-nighter scripting various egotistical and over-reaching replies for the interviews this evening.”

The butler paused with the slate-grey jacket in hand, puzzled by Will’s heartbroken, angry look. “Whatever is the matter?”

“You must have known,” Will blurted, ignoring all the fancy guests in their suits and dresses passing by, everyone sparing a glance of pity, confusion or dismay for the strange, raving young teacher who wasn’t even *dressed for a ball.*

“About Lady Bedelia. That there was to be an official announcement at the ball, that there was to be an *engagement.*”

Will perched his hands on his hips. Sweat gathered on his upper lip, tears in the corners of his eyes, heart boiled with his own pudding and buried with a stake of holly through it.

His curls spilled wildly across his forehead, and he knew he looked crazy. Just as Bedelia had likely hoped to make him appear when she sprung the news on him, quickly sussing out the situation and deciding that Will was a pre-engagement fling to be quickly shoved aside in her own favor. Her *planned* favor.

Truth be told, Will hadn't heard much that *that woman* or Hannibal said after she heard the word "engagement," but then, he told himself in his present temperament of unreasonable despair, he did not really need to hear anything after that, did he?

"I'm aware that the council have been pressuring his majesty to make such a commitment and announce it tonight," Abel replied frankly, brow creased in concern. "Nothing more. Quite honestly, I was hoping his obvious affection for *you* would cause him to toss the concept of a loveless marriage aside. It is simply not worth wasting such a large and loving heart on some hollow attempt to appease the advisors, who tell him this will please the people."

"So, you do know all about it. It's common knowledge, apparently. And yet, his *majesty* forgot to tell me."

Will scowled and ran for the red carpeted steps upstairs, hating the velvet crush under his feet, the tacit, perfect elegance and quiet of the palace. Every stitch of his clothes, from shirt to shoes, jacket to gloves and hat stuffed in his pocket, a gift from King Hannibal. He might as well be any other fixture or pretty adornment at this ball, in the castle, the lofty King's possession until he wasn't.

His heart crumpled in his chest. He was going to run out of metaphors for the pain, but it hurt. It *hurt.*

"Will!" Abel called, baffled and reassuring, "King Hannibal has made no such announcement about Lady Bedelia. Perhaps you should speak with him rather than rushing to conclusions. Why don't you put on a suit and come down in a bit to join the festivities?"

"Please do," Hannibal added, appearing in the foyer, looking paler than usual. Lady Bedelia, nowhere to be seen; Princess Abigail in the King's arms, still half-asleep.

Will dropped his guarded, furious look. They couldn't fight in front of Abigail. "Why should I?" he mouthed.

"I'm sure Abigail's tutor will be her escort this evening and make sure she has a lovely time while not too pestered by the various foreign nobility who like to tell her how big she has gotten and ask generic questions until she's bored to tears and tempted towards pranks," Hannibal said crisply, giving his lover a pointed look.

"Fine. See you soon, your highness," Will said as non-frustratedly as he could, the tone artificially casual.

***

Hannibal then had to endure providing a polite greeting to guest after guest and the hassling urges from Frederick to address the crowd of journalists and citizens who had gathered outside in such excited anticipation of the festive occasion and any news that might flow out of it. He had gotten past them with a brief few remarks indicating his speech would be given later in the night, tossing out “at midnight” simply to have something to say.

“I told them midnight, Frederick, and midnight it shall be,” Hannibal replied with a steely look.

Lady Bedelia came inside, no doubt after giving some vague but suggestive of her victory remarks to the reporters. He was so, so very irritated with the woman, ready to discard what had at least been a respectful connection of basic friendship at this rate. While he wasn’t going to be bullied into marrying a woman he could now barely stand over the love of his life, which was Will, Hannibal also didn’t have extra time to waste on her.

Once all of the guests were ushered into the ballroom and seated for dinner (which he, Will and Abigail wouldn’t be able to eat a bite of after their delightful meal in town – the thought of it twisted his heart. So recently, merely an hour ago how happy they had all been, and now!), he rushed with elegant, breezy looks to his room and tossed on the first suitably formal tuxedo he could find, not caring as usual to make it supremely exquisite.

He made firm decisions to sort this out with Will and make the rest of the night go smoothly despite his much-regretted memory lapses in recalling there was a massive royal event occurring for which he was greatly responsible via hosting duties – and telling Will that Lady Bedelia even existed.

Oh, dear. And Will, already so insecure and fragile in his feelings, however strong he was in his personality, brilliance and moral fiber. He could certainly spare a few choice words for Frederick and Bedelia, but now he only wanted to find Will.

When he went into the ballroom, slipping as well as he could from all attempted conversations, filling in the blanks with kind and charming replies automatically before moving on past the guests’ crowded tables, he caught sight of Will and Abigail standing in front of the large and gorgeously decorated, sparkling tree in the back of the room and near the mandatory string quartet.

Approaching nearer, he heard Will playing a game with the princess about counting ornaments of various colors and designs, a merry contest to see who could do it faster.

Will was stunning, effortlessly so, in a plain but perfect tux, provided in the initial wardrobe he had sent the tutor, since they did often have official events of black tie nature to which Abigail and teacher must go.

Little had Hannibal guessed then, despite his instant infatuation with Will at the American hotel, how fast they would progress in the relationship he had then barely dared dream of, to be here, now, in love and out of sorts. To steal his memory of upcoming agenda items in a way that never would have happened in his previously over-working and cold existence.

He had no intention of letting his happily ever after slip through his fingers, nor Will's, not on Christmas of all times.

"Your majesty," Will greeted with a quick bow and a plastic, polite smile, the type of behavior that would be expected from a normal teacher and which Hannibal now hated to see from him.

"Father, see how well I have done," Abigail launched into a cheerful explanation detailing her choice of dress (a pretty one, bright ruby red with an ivy green belt and a jeweled brooch of holly berry design), the taming of her long auburn hair (with a red sequined headband) and Will's apparent insistence that she wear formal shoes resulting in the red mary-janes chosen over the preferred Converse sneakers. "And so, you see, I expect a second dessert."

Hannibal laughed, "I suppose I should have expected a trick at play," he said, hugging his daughter. "Of course, Abigail, but only one more sweet treat. And you need only stay for an hour, before it gets too tedious for you. Thank you so very much for getting ready even though it was at the last minute and I have been so very forgetful."

"Hmm. Love does that, I suppose," Abigail shrugged, happy for her father and teacher and the prospect of a lovely new family unit, but almost equally involved, in her childish way, with scouting out a lemon tart post-haste.

"Abigail," Will said, "You may go to the other children by the sweets table, and I'll be nearby to supervise you soon. Meantime, I-can-seeee-you," he winked. Abigail giggled. "And I'll know if you take more than one dessert."

"Ha! See you soon. I suppose the two of you have to kiss and say mushy nonsense and all that. Enjoy!" She flounced off with a fluff of her crinoline skirt, all red and green glitter and innocent merriness.

"Will," Hannibal began to reason. "I'm so terribly sorry that–"

"That you forgot to tell me – that in the eyes of the entire royal council and most of the Lithuanian people you've been engaged to that freaking icicle of a woman in everything but official announcement – for months?" Will inquired, words aggressive, tone light and suited for the formal occasion.

He wasn't going out of his way to draw attention or cause a scandal. Even now, when he felt awful thinking Hannibal meant to betray him. Hannibal loved him for this, his refusal to create a scandal in vengeance. But something else Will said had the King deeply out of sorts.

"You truly believe I would use you in such a way, deceive you and –"

"Haven't you?" Will scoffed, avoiding Hannibal's eyes.

"No. And I'm very, very sorry that I thought so little of the supposed engagement, or this ball, once I was near you – I forgot all about them both! Is that not evident?" Hannibal asked in a hushed tone, much more in danger of causing a scene than Will was.

Will's stony expression softened a little. "I want to believe that, it's just that…they all want you to marry *her,* and she's the sort of elegant royal person who seems to belong with you and in this life. It makes me sick, how she looks at you, how I've heard everyone chattering about you both like you're a couple, here tonight."

Hannibal sighed. "Oh, Will, I–"

But while neither he, nor Will, nor even Abigail had the chance to cause a scandal or a scene, Lady Bedelia found herself more than capable, much to Hannibal's surprise.

"Excuse me," she said, appearing on the stage in front of the mildly alarmed looking musicians, a chilly and stern but offended look on her face. The microphone squealed with a second of feedback and everyone winced. She had their full attention.

"I'm so terribly sorry to interrupt a festive occasion with troubling news, but I have no choice." She patted her ivory throat and said, as if she'd lost a loved one, "My necklace, a family heirloom, priceless in actual and emotional value – has been stolen by someone in this room tonight."

"Oh, brother," Will murmured as across the room, Abigail giggled, finishing her one lemon tart and chatting happily with some of the other royal and noble children.

"Serves her right," Abigail declared, at which Bedelia glared for a moment and Will belatedly issued a *hush, now* look to the princess.

"Whatever is she about?" Hannibal muttered. He glanced from the non-fiancee on the stage to the man lingering in curtained shadows behind her. Frederick Chilton. A game was afoot, and he did not like the look of it one bit–

The guests were talking quietly amongst themselves, suitably shocked and concerned with the loss of this diamond choker.

"It pains me to think that someone here, someone that the King trusts implicitly enough to have here in his inner sanctum, could be so selfish and cruel as to steal from his dear, dear friend," Bedelia continued in the same martyr's tone. "And so we'll be conducting a search of everyone – no one is to leave the room or touch their pockets, their handbags, until officially searched by a palace guard. We will catch this thief before–"

That was it. Hannibal had *endured* all he could, and the passive streak in his personality which had taken root since the deaths of his wife and father disappeared, replaced with forthright manly confidence.

"You will do absolutely no such thing, Lady Bedelia," Hannibal said in a booming, kingly tone that struck everyone silent.

He noticed a fluttering of the curtain backstage and added firmly, "Come out onto the stage, Frederick. You've earned the starring role, come and claim it."

Frederick appeared, sheepish yet trying his best to seem totally amazed and clueless at the order.

“Why, your majesty, I can’t imagine why you’d suspect me of any –”

“Shut up,” Hannibal commanded. Everyone’s jaws dropped, including Will.

Shut up??

He strode quickly to the stage and leapt to it with a dancer’s grace, skipping the last two steps. Crossing past the band, to whom he spared a gracious nod, he took the microphone from Bedelia’s frosty grip, avoiding any touch between them.

“You’re to stay put as well, *your ladyship,*” he ordered, sharing all of his orders with the audience before them by using the microphone in addition to his unavoidably compelling tone. “For now.”

As Bedelia and Frederick exchanged confused looks but seemed quickly calculating, Hannibal clucked his tongue.

“Don’t you dare, either one of you. No last minute change of schemes, no campaign suggesting ‘His majesty has finally lost his mind, it must be all the pressure, we are innocent of any charge, of course, for he is quite delusional.’ You may set aside all such strategies and for once in both of your lives, listen to me with some damned respect.”

The room as a whole seemed to gasp at the curse from the King. Hannibal let their shock sink into his pores, somewhat happy to have upended their perception of him as flawlessly polite. No, he preferred to be *human* with his people, with his friends and associates from other kingdoms. He was not the mere figure of a king on the chessboard of his advisors and (*never*) would-be queen.

In the crowd, despite the slight glare of the stage lights upon him he could see Abigail, munching dutifully on fresh fruit rather than stealing another tart, watching the events unfold without a care in the world aside from mild entertainment, and then Will, absolutely surprised and much more confused than either vile personage on the stage beside the King.

“Now,” Hannibal continued boldly, “I apologize profusely to you all from the bottom of my heart. Firstly, for allowing the grief in my life to eclipse my confidence as a ruler, which has invited foolish and manipulative souls to render me shaky in my self-worth.

As a result, I spent too many months overworking myself to exhaustion. I was trying to prove that I have what it takes to be a good King, but I had forgotten — conveniently to others — that the will and strength to rule is already mine. The good and just instincts with which I was born and have running through my veins, no one will ever take nor make me doubt again:

I am your king.”

Everyone except for Frederick and Bedelia applauded with great approval. Frederick gave a sullen and half-hearted little flutter of his hands, barely clapping; Bedelia crossed her arms,

an unusual lapse in posture.

“Thank you. There’s just a bit more I must tell you. You see, sad as it makes me to reveal this, I have let this scoundrel Chilton worm his way into so much influence that he has actually believed he could ensure his continued security and power by tricking me into marrying *this* creature,” gesturing at Lady Bedelia, who put a hand over her mouth and her heart, startled and “saintly.”

“This deceptive and greedy woman who most certainly intended to see the man I love cast out while she took her place beside me by midnight, accepting a proposal I shall *never* give to her.”

“Your majesty!” Frederick exclaimed, “Your reputation, your royal duty, please– think of the scandal–”

“It’s you who should have thought of the scandal.” He smirked cooly at Bedelia’s horrified muteness. “Both of you. Not quite so amusing when your misdeeds and lies are revealed in front of everyone you’ve tried to hoodwink, is it? The despicable crime you have tried here is obvious to me, due mostly to my possession of two brain cells at least.”

“There is certainly no crime of which I am–” Bedelia was utterly insulted and did a good job of seeming angelic, despite her obvious shock and delayed ability to fully process what Hannibal was saying and doing.

“Only this,” Hannibal sighed, exhausted with his aggravation. “You’ve placed your necklace in the pocket of the true innocent of these proceedings, haven’t you? Trying to make him out to be the thief? Really, Lady Bedelia, simply because you think in such despicably transparent terms and allow Chilton here to charm you into pursuing them, that does not make me quite the fool you believe me to be. How convenient, if I were only that much of a dunce.

Instead, please allow me, dear friends and indeed, my enemies,” he said with a glance behind him at the accused. “Let me introduce you to the most wonderful, special and beloved man of my life, Mr. Will Graham.”

He gestured now with a sweeping hand to the still-astonished Will, who had gone pink-cheeked, regret for his doubts shimmering in tear-filled eyes.

“Now, sweetheart, none of that sadness, not anymore.” Hannibal shook his head as the crowd’s intrigued applause died down. “Come here to me, please.”

He beckoned, and Will went. That would never change.

Onstage, Will’s heart hammered, this time any metaphor his creative mind could conceive for his emotions merely sprinkled with pure happiness, only an undercurrent of guilt and regret that he had not trusted Hannibal’s intentions all along.

“I’m sorry, I ought to have known,” Will sighed away from the microphone. “Oh, Hannibal, I’m sorry. I *did* know. But I’ve never been loved like this. I’ve never wanted anything as

much as I wanted you to love me and – I let the fear of losing it make me crazy."

"Not at all." Hannibal patted Will's cheek. "You're human, like me. I was forgetful and whimsical in the bright glow of new passion, and you were – beautifully open-hearted, even when you doubted. I forgive you, and hope you forgive me for being neglectful in telling you important details…plus in allowing these two miscreants to brew such trouble."

"Of course," Will smiled, grateful, "Should we tell them, then? I feel it now, the weight…"

"Yes, indeed, my love." Hannibal removed the hand with which he'd covered the mic and resumed to the guests, "Will has observed a new weight in his pocket. I think we all know what that is. Kindly render to Lady Bedelia what is Lady Bedelia's, my darling, so that we may wash our hands of her."

"Sure thing." Will smirked at his "rival," reaching into his pocket and pulling out the gaudy diamond-studded choker. He went to her and dropped it into her outstretched palm, as if she was too disgusting to risk touching. "As if I'd wear something this *tacky*, or be dumb enough to steal it, not to mention betray the man I love on Christmas of all times," he said with deliberate, equal measures of sass and justified indignance.

"You…you righteous, reckless twitchy little man," Bedelia snarled, humiliated. She gripped the necklace and insisted, "I never put it in his pocket! He's a thief! He's a little guttersnipe, lying his way into a crown and fortune, making me out to be a traitor when–"

"Guards?" Hannibal called casually. Will returned to his side and they joined hands. "Please remove Lady Bedelia and Frederick Chilton from the premises at once. They are henceforth barred from all entry to the royal grounds, and any communication from them equally rejected upon sight. In the holiday spirit, I wish you both well, but don't ever cross my sight again if you know what's good for you."

"Or mine," Will added, and Hannibal kissed his cheek, squeezing his hand.

"That is very attractive in you, my angel," he drawled into Will's ear while the younger man blushed and bit his lip. "How you'll beguile them with your boldness and integrity."

"*stoooppppp,*" Will laughed as they paid no mind at all to the advisor and lady being escorted away by burly royal guards in uniforms, all the while with the two rejects complaining of their entire blamelessness in the affair. They might have been two bleating goats for all the mind the King and teacher paid them, and the crowd gladly applauded their dismissal, cementing their entire public disgrace.

"Please, ask the approved top five journalists to come in," the King asked, earning a nod of understanding from one the guards right before the great doors of the ballroom closed behind them, forever shutting out Bedelia and Frederick.

"Ah, that is better," he smiled.

"This is the best ball we ever had!" Abigail cried, "What else have you planned, Father?"

The room fondly smiled at the little girl's bubbly precociousness. Not for them a dull and superficial, overly stiff family of royals, that much was sure!

"I haven't planned any of this," Hannibal responded delightedly to his daughter, "except for one part which I know you will approve."

"Ohhh," Abigail laughed. "Is this more of the mushy stuff?"

"I'm afraid so, but just think, you could have had Lady Maleficent as a stepmother." Hannibal pulled a face and she giggled.

"No, I couldn't have, either," she returned cleverly. "I know you never cared for her that way, and certainly not after you met Will and your face started doing that weird, soft, distracted thing all the time. Can I have another tart by the way?"

"No," Will and Hannibal said in unison, and she shrugged.

"Go ahead then, Father!" She clapped in excitement despite the denied tart.

"Will Graham." Hannibal immediately went down on one knee and gathered Will's soft, pale hand into this own, caressing the callouses from his art and work about the castle, labors he need only engage in again if he so chose.

His life thereafter would be one of entire luxury and enjoyment, so far as Hannibal planned.

"Oh, Hannibal," Will said, tears spilling from his bright eyes.

The crowd sat in rapt amazement. Abigail elbowed one of the other children and winked. "Here it comes. *So* silly and mushy. Suppose it can't be helped. Grown ups!"

"I don't deserve this," Will sighed, "After so easily doubting you–"

"Will. You deserve the world." Hannibal drew a sparkling ring from his pocket. "I'm giving my world to you. And this ring, which is the only one I intended to bestow this evening, this ring is for you if you will have me. I am for you, if you wish it."

"But…you're this…unbelievably amazing King, and I'm just me. Why – what did I do to –"

"My darling." Hannibal leaned down slightly and gave him a slyly adoring look which only they understood upon his next words. "You had me at 'sewing kit'."

This, of course, a reference to Will's babbling at their first meeting, offering to mend the King's ruined jacket, his torn shirt. Oh, how grateful they both were now for the spilled drink and chance collision. It felt like true Christmas magic.

Will finally believed. He nodded, trembling, as the royal engagement ring was placed on his finger, and then Hannibal stood, drawing him immediately into an epic embrace and kiss. The audience applauded.

In came the journalists, the ones Hannibal trusted to tell the real story, frills-free. He parted from Will's kisses with a thoroughly elated smile such as his people had not seen him wear in ages.

"Ah," he grinned, his arm around his fiance, Will blushing and grinning as well, the ring with its delicate row of inset diamonds suiting him splendidly. "You're just in time."

He was proud to have Will marked clearly as his own by the ring, and intended to express this pride and admiration for hours that night when all the guests had departed and he got his boy alone again. Yes. Will would look so very pretty in only the ring, Hannibal could hardly wait. From the coy smile on his fiance's face, and the glimmer in naughty blue eyes he knew Will had understood the intention and shared his joy at the prospect.

First, he made his public announcements, letting the reporters record all his explanations of the royal engagement, the disbanding of his most recent cabinet of advisors and his intention to build a new system with more trustworthy and moral associates to help him in making the choices and implementing the work to keep the country prosperous. It was made clear that Lady Bedelia DuMaurier had practiced a dreadful deceit upon his majesty and the future royal consort, Mr. Will Graham, and had been turned out of doors into the snowy night on account of it.

And at midnight, when the interviews and all formal considerations were over and the maids had brought Abigail up to bed in her room to dream of what Santa Claus would bring her in the morning (for yes, despite her attempted cynical remarks on the contrary, she did still believe), the King led his beloved outside along with the remaining guests and they all watched with wonder and festive delight the fireworks display welcoming Christmas day.

Abigail, in so deep a slumber by then that the sounds of the bright show did not make her stir, remained peaceful. By her bed there was Will's Christmas gift to her, a sketch of Abigail's mother, done in reverence and love for her daughter, in commemoration of her memory. Abigail could always keep the likeness nearby and feel her mother's love warm around her.

After the fireworks and saying a fond farewell to the guests who had certainly never attended such an entertaining royal ball, Will led his fiance by hand to his own private rooms.

There, bashful but open, just as his majesty liked him best, Will sat upon the bed. He unfastened the various implements of his tuxedo, save for the shirt, which he left unbuttoned while batting his long lashes at the King who waited, eyes darkening with desire. Will laid himself out on the plush mattress like a submissive offering of overflowing desire and love, which is exactly what he was.

The King savored him all night as promised, slowly at first, kissing and caressing his boy from head to toe, gradually progressing to biting and sucking at tender skin and groping firm muscle, soft curves, all while pouring out words of dominating adoration and praise, royal orders which Will happily fulfilled. Naked, sinful, *excellent* royal orders.

When dawn found them in a physically necessitated break from long, sweaty, intense and powerful lovemaking, tangled in sheets and one another, Hannibal kissed his future husband's forehead and Will whispered a merry Christmas. Then he reached to the table beside the bed

and showed Hannibal every last one of the drawings in his sketch book. The portraits of King Hannibal that had been his obsessive, restless concern of late, so beautifully rendered, even when Will had been frightened at the force of his own feelings and feared they were not returned, causing wobbly lines and pencils breaking through the paper. Hannibal treasured them all.

They composed themselves, bathed and dressed in their warm Christmas pajamas, then woke Abigail so they could enjoy a special family celebration downstairs in the cozy library with its medium-sized tree where Father Christmas had left the presents (with plentiful treats for the princess and Will, of course). Christmas could not have been more soothing, comfortable, pleasant and easy with simple joys, those of family and love, and coming home.

Hannibal showed Will his own drawings later, and they marveled at how each of them had recorded their love story in pencil strokes and soft watercolor.

They had each made the other a special new one as a Christmas gift, to which they now quickly sketched the engagement ring onto Will's hand so that it was an accurate depiction of their joy. The portraits, smiling and love-struck King and husband-to-be, would be placed side by side in full-color glory, framed and displayed in the foyer by New Year's.

And for once in Will's life he didn't have to wonder what the hell he *would* be doing on New Year's Eve, as the old song said. He knew he would be right there, with his King, *in their castle*, right where he belonged.

Chapter End Notes

Sigh....them!

End Notes

Fic playlist: https://open.spotify.com/playlist/3u8u0TQop3wmnkwzFhbLF2?si=4d90b83506d24022

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